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Description

Review of *Reinventing the Wheel: A Buddhist Response to the Information Age* / Hershock, Peter D. Albany, State University of New York Press, 1999. *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet is Killing Our Culture* Keen, Andrew. New York, Doubleday, 2007.

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Reinventing the Wheel: A Buddhist Response to the Information Age

Posted on **October 1, 2007** by **Editor**



By **Jeffrey Barlow** <barlowj@pacificu.edu>

Reinventing the Wheel: A Buddhist Response to the Information Age

Hershock, Peter D.

Albany, State University of New York Press, 1999.

The Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet is Killing Our Culture

Keen, Andrew.

New York, Doubleday, 2007.

At the Berglund Center for Internet Studies we value thoughtful criticisms of the Internet as much or more than the more frequently encountered breathless appreciations of it. In this essay we wish to examine not only two works offering very different critiques of the Internet, but to better understand the current nature of critical views themselves. We think something important has changed in the last several years. Criticisms of the Internet necessarily must now largely come from inside it, rather than from outside it—a distinction we attempt to clarify below.

The two books considered here are each very critical. The inside view, *Andrew Keen's The Cult of the Amateur*, is rather lightweight and we treat it here as an example of a traditional approach: "The cultural sky is falling, and it is all the fault of the Internet!"

The second, Peter D. Hershock's *Reinventing the Wheel* is much more complex, fundamentally an outsider's view in that it criticizes not only the Internet, but the very Western culture which has led to it.

It would be very difficult to conceive of any possible circumstance, other than a review essay such as this one, which might bring these two works together for one audience. The two authors' definitions of technology are so different as to cause a reader to wonder if they are

looking at even the same general subject area, but the works share a critical view of the status quo.

Andrew Keen [1] has been a Silicon Valley entrepreneur and is now a frequent writer and event speaker on the topic of the Internet, usually from a highly critical viewpoint. This particular work focuses, if one can stretch the meaning of “focus” to include such a discursive and repetitive approach as it utilizes, upon Web 2.0.

The concept of Web 2.0 has grown so broad in the several years since it was first introduced [2] that it has become correspondingly elusive. Keen never bothers to define it. Tim O’Reilly defines it from a business perspective as:

- Services, not packaged software, with cost-effective scalability
- Control over unique, hard-to-recreate data sources that get richer as more people use them
- Trusting users as co-developers
- Harnessing collective intelligence
- Leveraging the long tail through customer self-service
- Software above the level of a single device
- Lightweight user interfaces, development models, AND business models” [3]

Web 2.0 is as much an approach to the creation and use of Internet content as it is a restricted set of applications. Web 2.0 content depends primarily upon a distributed model for both the creation and housing of electronic information and applications. Simply put, closely related content usually has multiple authors and may be distributed across multiple sites.

In Keen’s analysis, Wikipedia is the quintessential Web 2.0 project, involving as it does a widely distributed group of contributors with all the attendant evils of questionable information, anonymity and, “...killing the traditional information business...” [4]

As the title suggests, the chief gripe of the author is that “The Cult of the Amateur” is destroying both culture and economy. Although the title also suggests that the work is going to deal primarily with Web 2.0, it quickly becomes a compost pile of familiar rants about the Internet, including even yet again blaming it for the destruction of that sacred artifact, the book.

However, the crimes of the Internet continue to mount and now include, in Keen’s estimation, the destruction of network television, music, advertising, newspapers, the movies, and the creation of “...an infestation of anonymous sexual predators and pedophiles.” [5]

One of the many delicious ironies of this work is that the author so frequently practices that which he condemns. Perhaps his major criticism of the Internet is that it empowers millions of users, described at one point as “not quite monkeys” [6] to publish. These writers, of course, lack all the values, credentials, and proper approaches of traditional purveyors of high culture.

They don't even have editors! Hence, presumably, they might produce passages such as Keen's own: "The result? The decline of the quality and reliability of the information we receive, thereby distorting, if not outrightly corrupting, our national civic conversation." [7]

The reason for discussing this work here is not to belabor Mr. Keen—he needs no assistance in that regard—but to gauge the level to which criticism of the Internet currently has fallen. The work is a pastiche of familiar diatribes, aimed at all those who worry about change. This book does, however, finally identify the agent responsible for the decline of Western Man—The Internet.

The work might have had the value of at least functioning as a sort of one-man Wikipedia of Internet criticism, but it lacks real notes and rarely cites any of the many thoughtful authorities who have distinguished themselves as critics of the Internet. The work is simply stitched together with breathless rhetorical questions such as "What happens, you might ask, when ignorance meets egoism meets bad taste meets mob rule?" We answer: Andrew Keen's *The Cult of the Amateur!*

We regret that for works on recent criticism of the Internet we are reduced to discussing this one. In defense of our choice, we observe that the book is on most bookstore shelves dealing with the Internet and that the author is tirelessly promoting it, over the Internet itself, of course.

However, we utilize the work to make a larger point: criticism of the Internet now comes increasingly from, in effect, inside the Internet itself. That is, the impact of the Internet is so pervasive that we now cannot approach it from outside. We must use electronic sources, Internet enabled applications, even thoughts and metaphors conditioned if not created by the impact of the Internet. It has become us.

The reasons why this change has occurred and are inevitable are exhaustively laid out in Peter D. Hershock's work, *Reinventing the Wheel*. Hershock is both a practicing Buddhist and an authoritative scholar of Buddhism, working at the East West Center in Honolulu associated with the University of Hawaii, at the time this work was written in 1996. [8]

This is not an easy book. If the value of Keen's work is depreciated by slapdash writing and organization, Hershock's is somewhat vitiated by his architectonic thoughtfulness. The book requires mindful effort to get through.

But the effort is worthwhile. *Reinventing the Wheel* presents a thorough criticism of the "Information Age," including, of course, the Internet.

Many might find it surprising that such an ancient philosophy as Buddhism has anything fresh to say about cyberculture or the Internet. [9] However, at the Berglund Center we held a summer symposium in 2002. Among the topics covered were religion and the Internet. We found, to our surprise, that at that time Buddhist institutional sites were probably the most numerous on the

Internet as opposed to Christian church sites, Jewish synagogue sites, or those of other religions. As the Internet developed, this ratio changed significantly. [10]

There are many reasons why Buddhists find the Internet attractive. As Hershock points out, the nature of Buddhism is to stress connectivity and relatedness. Too, the distinction between Buddhism as philosophy and as religion may be important here. In the West in particular, there are certainly far more practitioners of Buddhist ethics than there are religious practitioners and the Internet is probably their most useful study source. True religious believers, lacking local temples, may find the Internet a critical tool for developing and understanding their beliefs. [11]

Hershock himself is clearly an extremely intellectual sort of Buddhist, practicing a form of Chinese Chan (transmitted via a Korean teacher in his case), known more familiarly in the West as Zen, from its Japanese form.

Hershock would probably reject any separation between “practice” and “belief,” but it might be useful for us to ground ourselves in the elemental teachings of Buddhism as widely accepted. The central teachings are the Four Noble (or Holy) Truths:

- All existence is unsatisfactory and filled with suffering.
- The root of suffering can be defined as a craving or clinging to the wrong things; searching to find stability in a shifting world is the wrong way.
- It is possible to find an end to suffering.
- The Noble Eightfold Path is the way to finding the solution to suffering and bringing it to an end. [12]

The Eightfold Path is divided into three basic categories as follows [13]:

Wisdom

- A. Right view
- B. Right intention

Ethical conduct

- A. Right speech
- B. Right action
- C. Right livelihood

Mental discipline

1. Right effort
2. Right mindfulness
3. Right concentration

These teachings are the essence of Buddhist belief—life is painful, because we crave both things and pleasurable states; we can end this pain, by certain practices and beliefs described above as the Eightfold Path.

While important to an understanding of Buddhism, the above information is only tangentially important to reading Hershock. Part of his skill in explaining a very alien and unfamiliar tradition of Buddhism, lies in his ability to abstract from the above important points, and to relate them to the daily life of a modern Western audience.

Hershock can relate to us, and can bring us to relate to Buddhism, however, he markedly disapproves of our modern daily life. He believes that the Western tradition has diverged from human practices and beliefs, particularly in the modern era of the Information Age.

Hershock believes that the technology itself is inherently not “right”. It grows out of and reflects Western culture, which is, in his analysis, a culture emphasizing control and distancing between users. We should be “connected” not to electronic others, but to all of creation, to all sentient beings. The Information Age is reinforcing a commoditized culture that destroys the essence of our humanity. To quote him at length:

...I want to argue that the rapid spread of high-tech media is adversely related to the ideal of cultural diversity, not because of their explicit content or the varied intentions directing their use, but rather because of the way in which they tacitly reconfigure our awareness as such. Used ubiquitously enough, the media and the technologies on which they depend “invisibly” alter the structure of personhood in ways that erode the differences on which viable cultural diversity—and so harmony—finally depend. [14]

Hershock’s condemnation is thoroughgoing. It would be hard to isolate any element of the technologically enabled life that is not ultimately destructive, in his view, of key human values and institutions. Take any of the usual hopeful bromides about the benefits of technology and you will find a passage, or several pages, or an entire chapter in Hershock’s work that convincingly disproves them.

For example, does the Internet facilitate democracy? No, Grasshopper, see Chapter 8 wherein it is shown that the media restricts and controls all promise of democracy and rather facilitates a sort of corporate “colonization of consciousness” [15] of individual attention and energy that ultimately precludes meaningful democracy.

Has the information age given us more access to information, thus freeing our consciousness and increasing diversity of thought and opportunity? No, the more technology a given society can deploy, the more highly structured its economic classes and the greater the disparity there is in the distribution of wealth, and therefore of opportunity. The more technology, worldwide, the more poverty.

Hershock's definition of technology is key to his analysis, and somewhat idiosyncratic:

In the vernacular, technologies are not things. To the contrary, technologies have much the same status as the cultural, political, or economic institutions that so definitively shape our day-to-day lives....a technology is a way of making things happen. In this sense, technologies are perhaps best seen as practices. [16]

Distinguishing technology from what it is not might further illuminate this very complex definition: technology is not a tool or tools. A tool is "something we control directly". But technology becomes an end, perhaps in Hershock's schema, a "desire" in and of itself.

Those familiar with Western critical social thought might see Hershock's as just another thinly veiled Marxist discussion of alienation; it is not. Marx, as a card-carrying member of the Western intellectual tradition, necessarily comes in for his own lambasting, at great length and again in highly organized and convincing argumentation. [17]

Neither does Hershock see the corporatization of the Internet as a simple "us" vs. "them" conflict, but rather a result of "our" wants. The problem is a direct consequence of technology itself.

What is to be done? Hershock bundles the usual criticisms of technology—and specifically of the Internet—into two groups.

The first is the school of "monkey-wrenching"—a romantic refusal to use computers, cell-phones, etc., sometimes extending even to a Luddite attack upon them. Obviously this school—which we might, with Hershock, typify also as the Unibomber approach—is now seldom encountered outside of certain high-security federal institutions. This, of course, furthers our argument here that criticism increasingly comes from inside the Internet, not from outside it.

Also from inside is the second school comes what Hershock calls the "Greening" position. This school argues for better laws, more purposive use, more education, increased parental guidance—the 95 Theses of the Internet Reformation.

The problem with this second school, Hershock argues, is that in attacking the failures of the Information Age with the concentration and intensity necessary to reform it, we wind up in a sense worshipping it, and thus becoming part of the problem itself. That way, Hershock believes, ultimately lays terrorism. [18]

With Hershock, if we have followed his criticisms we may well accept them; they are thoughtful and thought provoking. We come away from *Reinventing the Wheel* with a better understanding of the Internet and the Information Age in which it is embedded. But we want a solution. If we cannot blow it up or reform it, what can we do?

Hershock tells us to walk away and meditate until we have changed our desires—to make an axiological adjustment. This is, of course, the only possible Buddhist answer. But while Buddhism may come to many of us as a fresh new solution, this particular form of Buddhism has been criticized from within the tradition itself.

An early Buddhist critique of this meditative approach to axiological reform was to point out that it is only suitable for those who can somehow live substantially outside the world—perhaps in a meditative environment such as a temple, perhaps in a high degree of self-imposed social isolation—perhaps like Hershock and myself, in a professor's office.

That major criticism resulted historically in the development of new schools of Buddhism which were truly religious in that they permitted believers to call upon (via activities and attitudes fairly described as "worship" rather than meditation) successful practitioners who chose to linger in a spiritual sense in the world and lend assistance to the less able. These "saints" then, assist the rest of us, if properly called upon.

It seems to me, that as valuable as Hershock's criticism is, his solution, too, is outside the real world, and in a world which so very few of us can reach that it is no more than a tantalizing and perhaps temporary refuge from our endless desires, electronically enabled or otherwise.

In short, meditation doesn't answer e-mail, though I it might well make us happier while doing so. A Zen master might well tell us, "When e-mailing, just e-mail." Doubtless this would improve our email as well as our orientation toward the noisy world in which we necessarily live.

Read together, these two works, as different as they are, amply support one point: Henceforth, criticisms of the Internet will necessarily come from inside it.

The first author under review here, Andrew Keen, may stand on muddy ground, but his criticism is recognizably from what the second author, Peter D. Hershock, typifies as the Greening School—reform the monstrous thing or lose Western culture! We may disagree with Keen's criticisms but we recognize them and can argue with them on the basis of commonly held assumptions and evidence.

But Hershock, the ultimate outsider, shows us the fate of truly axiological critiques—critiques that take on the Internet not in some limited shortcoming, but confront its very existence head-on. The problem in launching one's barbs from outside the Internet, however persuasive they may be, is that the critic still needs a place to stand. And there is now no place to stand that does not necessarily recognize the Internet as inextricably woven into and through world culture, economy and daily life.

There are, of course, many who do not enjoy these "benefits" and Hershock ably shows the dark side of this particular form of progress, but for better or worse, the questions that can now be asked about the Internet are largely reduced to how to improve and extend it.

Notes

[1] Keen's blog is found at: <http://andrewkeen.typepad.com/> and perhaps gives the best flavor of his contrarian's analysis, as well as his self-absorption.

[2] See what is usually taken to be the definitive statement on the meaning and origins of the concept, Tim O'Reilly's piece, "What Is Web 2.0 Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software" at:

<http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html?page=1>

[3] <http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html?page=5>

[4] Keen, 131.

[5] Keen, 7.

[6] Keen, 2.

[7] Keen, 27.

[8] Fair disclosure requires that I am myself regarded as an alumnus of the Center because I have attended several conferences there, and I describe myself as a Buddhist on alternate days.

[9] Some schools of Buddhism, being theistic, are clearly religious in nature. Others, however, including that school espoused by Hershock, Chinese Chan (Zen in Japan), is not.

[10] A cursory Google search conducted July 14, 2007 turned up 9.62 million hits for "Christian Churches" and 2.6 million for "Buddhist temples" while "Synagogues" produced 5.42 million hits. There are many reasons why such a search should be regarded as little more than suggestive of Internet activity among practitioners of these three religious groups. A search on "Zen" for example produced 69.8 million hits.

[11] There are of course many local Buddhist congregations in any large urban area. In my experience, however, these tend to serve local ethnic emigrant communities.

[12] The source of this handy formulation can be found at:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/beliefs/fournobletruths.shtml> this is a BBC produced series of four audio lectures (with badly formatted transcripts) on the Four Noble Truths. Three of the four scholars featured are Westerners. For a more indigenous perspective one might visit the pages of the Dharma Realm Buddhist Association, found at: <http://www.drba.org/dharma/btts/9xxentrydetail.asp?wid=123>

[13] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noble_Eightfold_Path Reluctant as I am to utilize a Wikipedia site

due to its anonymity which violates a critical element of authority, as a scholar familiar with this field I accept this explanation as useful and correct.

[14] Hershock, xii.

[15] Hershock, 27, 63, 65.

[16] Hershock, 21.

[17] See Hershock, p. 90.

[18] Hershock, 273.

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10 THOUGHTS ON "REINVENTING THE WHEEL: A BUDDHIST RESPONSE TO THE INFORMATION AGE"

Salena Pacey

on **January 30, 2014 at 6:13 PM** said:

I relish, lead to I discovered exactly what I was looking for. You've ended my 4 day lengthy hunt! God Bless you man. Have a nice day. Bye

ns203268.ovh.net

on **February 4, 2014 at 6:03 PM** said:

I do not know if it's just me or if perhaps everyone else encountering issues with your blog.

It seems like some of the written text on your posts are running off the screen.

Can somebody else please provide feedback and let me know if this is happening to them too? This might be a issue with my browser because I've had this happen previously.

Thanks

christian ministry teaching bible

on **February 5, 2014 at 6:12 PM** said:

Magnificent beat ! I wish to apprentice even as you amend your website, hhow culd i subscribe forr a blog web site? The account aoded me a appropriate deal. I have Ben a little bit acquainted of this your broadcast offered shiny transparent concept

<http://schulforte.metalcon.de/index.php/Benutzer:ElizbethGallagh>

on **February 5, 2014 at 6:58 PM** said:

You really make it seem so easy with your presentation but I find this matter too be really something which I think I would never understand. It seems too complicated and very broad for me. I'm looking forward for your next post, I will try tto get the hang of it!

christian church phoenix

on **February 5, 2014 at 7:18 PM** said:

Wonderful article! This is the type off information that should be shared around thee net.

Shame on Google for no longer positioning this submit upper!

Come on over and consult with my site .

Thanks =)

<http://www.scottishwebcamsive.com>

on **February 5, 2014 at 7:41 PM** said:

Great site you have got here.. It's difficult to find good quality writing like yours these days.

I truly appreciate people like you! Take care!!

pastor hagee

on **February 6, 2014 at 4:33 AM** said:

These are truly fantastic ideas in about blogging.
You have touched som fastidiouis factors here. Any
way keep up writing.

xyzmous.com

on **February 6, 2014 at 5:16 AM** said:

Hi everybody, here every one is sharing these familiarity, thus
it's good to read this webpage, and I used to pay a visit this website daily.

<http://www.topsitesfitness.com/>

on **February 6, 2014 at 7:51 AM** said:

I've learn several just right sthff here.
Certainly worth bookmarking for revisiting. I wondr how much effort you put
to make this type of excellent informative website.

cocker spaniel in pa

on **February 6, 2014 at 1:46 PM** said:

Thanks for sharing your thoughts about clarence
thomas. Regards