

GENERAL PAPER

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Paper 2

16 September 2013

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READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS FIRST

This Insert contains the passage for Paper 2.

Andrew Keen writes about the democratised media.

- 1 In the pre-Internet age, T. H. Huxley's scenario of infinite monkeys empowered with infinite technology seemed more like a mathematical jest than a dystopian vision. But what had once appeared as a joke now seems to foretell the consequences of a flattening of culture that is blurring the lines between traditional audience and author, creator and consumer, expert and amateur. This is no laughing matter. 5
- 2 Today's technology hooks all those monkeys up with all those typewriters. Except in our Web 2.0 world, the typewriters are not quite typewriters, but rather networked personal computers, and the monkeys are not quite monkeys, but rather Internet users. And instead of creating masterpieces, these millions of exuberant monkeys – many with no more talent in the creative arts than our primate cousins – are creating an endless digital forest of mediocrity. For today's amateur monkeys can use their networked computers to publish everything from uninformed political commentary, to unseemly home videos, to embarrassingly amateurish music, to unreadable poems. 15
- 3 At the heart of this infinite monkey experiment in self-publishing is the Internet diary, the ubiquitous blog. Blogging has become such a mania that we are blogging with monkey-like shamelessness about our private lives, our dream lives, our lack of lives, our Second Lives. The number of blogs on the Internet is doubling every six months, collectively corrupting and confusing popular opinion about everything from politics, to commerce, to arts and culture. Blogs have become so dizzyingly infinite that they have undermined our sense of what is true and what is false, what is real and what is imaginary. These days, kids cannot tell the difference between credible news by objective professional journalists and what they read on joeshmoe.blogspot.com. For these Generation Y utopians, every posting is just another person's version of the truth; every fiction is just another person's version of the facts. 25
- 4 Then there is Wikipedia, an online encyclopaedia where anyone with opposable thumbs and a fifth-grade education can publish anything on any topic. Since Wikipedia's birth, none of the three million entries have been authoritatively edited or vetted for accuracy. Wikipedia has become the third most visited site for information and current events; a more trusted source for news than the CNN or BBC web sites, even though Wikipedia has no reporters, no editorial staff and no experience in news-gathering. It is the blind leading the blind – infinite monkeys providing infinite information for infinite readers, perpetuating the cycle of misinformation and ignorance. On Wikipedia, everyone with an agenda can rewrite an entry to their liking – and contributors frequently do. Forbes recently reported a story of anonymous McDonald and Wal-Mart employees furtively using Wikipedia entries as a medium for deceptively spreading corporate propaganda. On Wal-Mart's entry, somebody eliminated a line about underpaid employees making less than the competition. 40
- 5 But the Internet's infinite monkey experiment is not limited to the written word. T. H. Huxley's 19th century typewriter has evolved into not only the computer, but also the camcorder, turning the Internet into a vast library for user-generated video content. One site, YouTube, is a portal of amateur videos that is the world's fastest-growing site. YouTube eclipses even the blogs in the inanity and absurdity of its content. Nothing seems too prosaic or narcissistic for these videographer monkeys. The site is an infinite gallery of amateur movies showing poor fools dancing, singing, eating, driving, sleeping or just staring into their 45

computers.

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- 6 Democratisation of the media, despite its lofty idealisation, is undermining truth and belittling expertise, experience and talent. It is threatening the very future of our cultural institutions. I call it the great seduction. The Web 2.0 revolution has peddled the promise of bringing more truth to more people – more depth of information, more global perspective, more unbiased opinion from dispassionate observers. But this is all a smokescreen. What the Web 2.0 revolution is really delivering is superficial observations of the world around us rather than deep analysis. The information business is being transformed by the Internet into the sheer noise of a hundred million bloggers all simultaneously talking about themselves. Moreover, the free, user-generated content spawned and extolled by the Web 2.0 revolution is decimating the ranks of our cultural gatekeepers, as professional critics, journalists, musicians, movie-makers, and other purveyors of expert information are being replaced by amateur bloggers, homespun movie-makers and attic recording artists. Meanwhile, the radically new business models based on user-generated material suck the economic value out of traditional media and cultural content. 55 60 65
- 7 We are being seduced by the empty promise of the democratised media. For the real consequence of the Web 2.0 revolution is less culture, less reliable news, and a chaos of useless information. One chilling reality in this brave new digital epoch is the blurring, obfuscation, and even disappearance of truth. Truth, to paraphrase Tom Friedman, is being ‘flattened’, as we create an on-demand, personalised version that reflects our own individual myopia. One person’s truth becomes as ‘true’ as anyone else’s. Today’s media is shattering the world into a billion personalised truths, each seemingly equally valid and worthwhile. This undermining of truth is threatening the quality of civil public discourse, encouraging plagiarism and intellectual property theft, and stifling creativity. When advertising and public relations are disguised as news, the line between fact and fiction becomes blurred. Instead of more community, knowledge, or culture, all that Web 2.0 really delivers is more dubious content from anonymous sources, hijacking our time and playing to our gullibility. 70 75 80
- 8 Blogs too, can be vehicles for veiled corporate propaganda and deception. In 2006, the *New York Times* reported about a blogger whose laudatory postings about Wal-Mart were ‘identical’ to press releases written by a senior account supervisor at the retailer’s PR company. Perhaps this is the same team behind the mysterious elimination of unflattering remarks about Wal-Mart’s treatment of its employees on the retailer’s Wikipedia entry. Blogs are increasingly becoming the battlefield on which public relations spin doctors are waging their propaganda war. In 2005, before launching a major investment, General Electric executives met with environmental bloggers to woo them over the greenness of a new energy-efficient technology. Meanwhile, multinationals like IBM all have blogs that, under an objective guise, peddle their versions of corporate truth to the outside world. 85 90
- 9 But the anti-corporate blogs are equally loose with the truth. In 2005, when the famous and fictitious finger-in-the-chilli story broke, every anti-Wendy’s blogger jumped on it as evidence of fast-food malfeasance. The bogus story cost Wendy’s \$2.5 million in lost sales as well as job losses and a decline in the price of the company’s stock. As former British Prime Minister James Callaghan said, ‘A lie can make its way around the world before the truth has the chance to put its boots on.’ That has never been more true than with the speeding, freewheeling culture of today’s blogosphere. 95 100

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