Stephanie Taylor tries to curb her enthusiasm for Web 2.0 by investigating the dark side of social networking.

Before I begin this review, I should declare my interests and publicly acknowledge that I not only work with social networking tools and technologies professionally, but I actually like many aspects of Web 2.0.

But I do not embrace Web 2.0 without reservations, and knowing I have a tendency occasionally to be ever so slightly blinded by my enthusiasms, I have been eager to investigate the more sceptical viewpoint and so, I hope, develop a more rounded view of the subject.

The strap line to Andrew Keen's book, How the Internet is Killing Our Culture and Assaulting Our Economy looked like the perfect antidote to my over-enthusiasm for all things Web 2.0. And the cover convinced me it was a must-read. Keen, it declares, is 'no Luddite but a Silicon Valley insider who pioneered several Internet startups himself.' Like the technical gurus quoted on the cover, I was eager to have my thoughts provoked and my horizons widened.

Keen wastes no time and outlines his basic premise in the first chapter. Basically, he feels that Web 2.0 technologies have been developed with a single, messianic message in mind - that the collective wisdom of the masses is better in every way than the individual wisdom of specialists. He thinks that the cult of Web 2.0 elevates the amateur above the professional expert as a matter of faith. And in his opinion, this is wrong. What is more, this new religion is spreading with evangelical zeal around the Western world and the mass converts are destroying the traditional media industries as they abandon cinemas, television, recorded music, newspapers and books in order to stampede online and grab and share free, amateur or stolen professionally produced content via blogs, wikis and file-sharing sites.

The end result is, according to Keen, cultural and economic meltdown right across Western civilisation. Loss of revenue streams from both advertising and paid-for content resulting in job cuts and, ultimately, he claims, the destruction of the culture created by the traditional media. And this, he concludes, is disastrous for the West because the traditional media are, for Keen, the guardians of all that is good in our culture.

It's a dramatic story. And for the rest of the book Keen follows it through the film industry, the newspaper and book-publishing industries and finally the recorded music industry, laying out his general theory again and again, illustrated with woeful examples from each sector. In Keen's world, the film and television industries are losing so much ground to amateur video sites such as YouTube that even a cultural icon as the Disney studio is embarking on frequent redundancy rounds. Newspapers are under attack from bloggers, books are left mouldering on the shelves as everyone joins forces to write collaborative wikis.

For Keen, this crisis culminates in the music industry. This industry, he claims, is now so damaged by loss of revenue from file-sharing technologies that record companies can no longer afford to nurture talent and create heavily produced albums. The closing down of his favourite record shop (Tower Records, San Francisco) is clearly a deeply felt, personal tragedy for the author.

And that, for me, is one of the main problems of this book. It is presented as polemic, but is nothing more or less than a personal view on cultural change. I have never felt affection for record shops (or vinyl records) and personally, I dislike heavily produced studio-based albums. So I don't care if record shops shut and music becomes less 'professional' on the production side. It's a matter of taste and personal preference. It is far too subjective an approach to warn of cultural meltdown because something the author does not like is becoming popular.

Which brings me to another problem with this work - namely the lack of any historical and cultural context to Keen's theories. Keen seems to have developed his viewpoint within the rather rarefied air of Silicon Valley in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. He seems unaware that technological changes in the past have previously revolutionised the then traditional media of the day. The overall impression he gives is that relatively recent technologies such as recorded music, film and television have been embedded in our culture forever when they are, in reality, a very recent development in cultural terms.

As one of the main thrusts of his argument is that Web 2.0 technologies are undermining the foundations of Western culture, the weight he gives to modern mass media channels that were developed primarily in the twentieth century renders his arguments less convincing.
From the broader cultural and heritage perspective, YouTube undermining the television industry seems like one recent, technologically driven newcomer being displaced by another even more recent, technology driven one. The questions he asks would be very interesting if his answers took into account the bigger picture. Without this context, his theories seem less well formed and come across as the work of an enthusiastic amateur, the very thing he criticises Web 2.0 for championing.

He also fails to deal with the business and economic side of the entertainment industry. He sees bookshops closing, but Amazon, one of the largest and most successful online retailers, started out selling books and books and music still form a large part of its business. Yet no reference is made to this. A lack of referenced facts and figures within the book generally left me less than entirely convinced by his conclusions. Without this kind of data to support his case, I fear that the author may open himself to the charge of over-reliance on anecdote when presenting his ideas.

Arguably Keen has completely failed to engage with the huge elephant in the room here. Namely that the modern mass media industries have been too effective as gate-keepers and are no longer engaging enough people in their potential audience. Web 2.0 allows people to decide what they want to watch, listen to and read. That is at the heart of the changes. How new technologies change a culture and how cultures shape the way technologies are used and developed is a fascinating and complex area that Keen has not really addressed.

What I would regard as wasted opportunities in his treatment of the subject is perhaps clearly exemplified by the author's interview with the musician Paul Simon. As a star in the conventional record company business, Simon personally does not like Web 2.0. 'I'm personally against Web 2.0 in the same way I'm against my own death.' Simon informs Keen. Simon then goes on to compare Web 2.0 to an uncontrollable forest fire, concluding "Maybe a fire is what's needed for a vigorous new growth, but that's the long view." Keen, however, does not discuss the idea of a need for Web 2.0 or take Simon's thoughts any further. Which is a shame, because it is an issue at the very heart of the debate.

There are also genuine concerns about quality control, who pays for content and the demise of some traditional knowledge and skills. But Keen's, to my mind, rather simplistic view of life fails either to raise or address these issues. There are some useful pockets of information and thought in the book, and his views on search engines and the way their development has been influenced by popularity rather than knowledge are both fascinating and important. He is clearly very knowledgeable in this area and I would like to read more of his views on this subject.

In his acknowledgements, at the end of the book, Keen confesses that this is his first book and that 'as a writer, I remain a bit of an amateur.' I am inclined to agree. As a cultural and economic commentator, he did not really challenge my views on Web 2.0 at all. I still feel I would like someone to do that, thought I suspect it will not be Andrew Keen, for all his admiration of traditional media formats, I feel he would make a better blogger than he does a print author. Ironically, both his style and content would benefit from a blog environment. I'm not sure I would be rushing to read his views on cultural change again, but if he ever starts a blog about popular search engines I think I would be a loyal reader and post many comments.
paean to the lost Golden Age of middlebrow taste-makers and big-media megaphones, and an extended jeremiad against an age in which people are free to make up their own minds, and make their own. Keen is even sad about the declining influence of small-scale taste-makers: He decries the absence of the “deeply knowledgeable Tower clerk” in the world of online record sales, and he seems to think that the musical snobs in the book (and film) High Fidelity were supposed to be appealing characters. I want to review this book but I can't because it makes me so angry I can't finish it. I fling it across the room and leave it for weeks before I try again. So far I've made to page 19. Months ago I set out to read Cult of the Amateur, by Andrew Keen, Doubleday 2007. I want to review this book but I can't because it makes me so angry I can't finish it. I fling it across the room and leave it for weeks before I try again. So far I've made to page 19.