

ARTS & CULTURE

Can We Save the Internet?

Andrew Keen is the author of *Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet is Killing Our Culture*. Kevin Kelly is the founding executive editor of *Wired* magazine. In this week's Big Question, they debate "Can we save the internet?"
From: ...

By [Andrew Keen](#) / May 29, 2007

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From: Andrew Keen To: Kevin Kelly Subject: Can We Save the Internet?

Hi Kevin, We are supposed to be discussing whether or not the Internet can be saved. But I'm not sure that this is a helpful way of thinking about the Internet. A better question is whether humankind can be saved. The authors of the Internet are you, me, and the rest of us; information technology has no will of its own, no spiritual autonomy, no existence independent of us. So when we look at the Internet, we are looking into a mirror, we are gazing at ourselves. The salvation of the Internet is, therefore, a human question. It's no good blaming technology for the corruption of the Internet. We have to take responsibility for our own collective invention. That is the first and most essential step toward digital salvation. To save the Internet means saving ourselves. When I look at today's Internet, I mostly see cultural and ethical chaos. I see the eruption of rampant intellectual property theft, extreme pornography, sexual promiscuity, plagiarism, gambling, contempt for order, intellectual inanity, crime, a culture of anonymity, hatred toward authority, incessant spam, and a trash heap of user-generated-content (whew, what a mouthful!). I see a chaotic humans arrangement with few, if any, formal social pacts. Today's Internet resembles a state of nature—Hobbes' dystopia rather than Rousseau's idyll. For most of human history, this state of nature has been theoretical—a fiction which thinkers like Hobbes or Rousseau have had to invent. With the Internet, however, we get to see a non-fictional state of nature. In real-time. Just go to an unregulated bulletin board or a sex chatroom. Take a quick tour of the blogosphere, that echo chamber of digital narcissism. This is an introduction to primeval man, *Homo sapiens 1.0*. It's how we behave when there are no social customs or formal laws governing our behavior. Can we blame the Internet for all this human corruption? Of course not. There has always been and always will be extreme pornography, illegal gambling, hubris, sexual promiscuity, contempt for meritocratic hierarchy, shameless narcissism, and political, sexual, and racial hatred. But, on the Internet, such corruption is exaggerated, and it is always on. Now we can gamble 24 hours a day on our networked computers. Now we can consume pornography without ever experiencing the social humiliation of going into a sex shop. Now we can taunt and insult and threaten our enemies anonymously without looking them in the eye. Now we can twitter to the whole world about what we ate for breakfast. Now we can steal our neighbor's wife, his credit cards, indeed his entire identity, with one click of our mouse. So can the Internet be saved? Yes, I think it can. But we need laws, a series of social contracts, to constructively regulate our behavior on the Internet. Even though I live in Berkeley, I'm not a **digital Maoist** and I'm not suggesting the imposition of draconian Internet laws. But I think we need *some* laws and certainly more aggressive social policing to control our worst impulses. I am in favor of laws that unambiguously punish digital piracy, more controls to stop kids accessing pornography, a tighter rein on online gambling, and tougher punishment against the spammers and the marketing scammers who are even ruining good old email.

We are all responsible for saving the Internet. Parents must teach kids self-control to resist the addictive nature of Internet gaming. Teachers need to clamp down

aggressively on intellectual plagiarism.

We all need to go back to paying for our content and replacing the Web 2.0 cult of the amateur with Western civilization's traditional cult of the author.

And we must (re)learn the ability to be silent, to listen to others more learned than ourselves, to value the wisdom of the expert. How else can we save the Internet? We must resist the siren song of anonymity—perhaps the greatest of all digital curses. The Internet holds much promise for social interaction. But this potential is undermined by the culture of anonymity. Much of the Internet's lack of civility is caused by our unwillingness to accept responsibility for our own words. We behave badly when we can hide behind fake identities. We are naturally obnoxious when we don't have to face the consequences of our own action. So, if we are to save the Internet, we need to confront the curse of anonymity. Let's all agree to discard our masks and end anonymity once and for all. The alternative is the statist Chinese model that makes anonymity punishable by law. And nobody—not even a kvetch like me—wants that. There's one other thing too. The Internet can be saved if we resist the education of virtual life, that opiate of online existence. **David Weinberger** is wrong. Not everything is miscellaneous. There is a difference—epistemologically, existentially, phenomenologically (and every other long word I can think of)—between physical life and virtual life. Internet sites like *Second Life* are not versions of alternative reality. This digital salvation is no better than that old wives' tale of heaven and hell. Being human doesn't mean transplanting our identities to an invented digital being. As I said before, when we look at the Internet, we are looking into a mirror, at ourselves. And when I look in my mirror, I don't want an avatar grinning back at me. I hope this makes a little bit of sense to you. And I hope it can help us save the Internet.

andrew k *Next: Kevin Kelly on The Cult of Anonymity*