Features from the Australian

Anarchy of distance

- The blogosphere has spawned aggressive males who use the internet to spew their vitriol and then hide in anonymity, writes Bryan Appleyard

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THE web is dead; long live the web. The dead web is Web 1.0. It had dial-up connections, dotcom crashes and some of the worst business plans since Napoleon marched on Moscow.

The live web is Web 2.0. It has broadband, enormous interactivity - or "user-generated content" - and Google, a faith-based operation whose employees proclaim "thank Google it's Friday" at the end of the working week. Web 2.0 makes money and owns the future.

The downside is that Web 2.0 may be destroying civilisation. That, at least, is the view of Andrew Keen, a Silicon Valley-based entrepreneur and author.

He has written The Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet is Killing Our Culture, which argues that the web is an anti-enlightenment phenomenon, a destroyer of wisdom and culture and an infantile, Rousseau-esque fantasy.

"It's the cult of the child," he says. "The more you know, the less you know. It's all about digital narcissism, shameless self-promotion. I find it offensive."

British-born Keen is not alone in feeling queasy. Last month a report by American psychologists, titled Inflated Egos Over Time, suggested that social-networking sites such as MySpace and YouTube were promoting damagingly high - and illusory - levels of self-esteem among teenagers.

Meanwhile, bloggers have been angered by two high-profile attacks from the land of "dead tree" journalism.

In Britain's The Times, Oliver Kamm accused bloggers of "poisoning debate".

"Blogs," he wrote, "typically do not add to the available stock of commentary: they are purely parasitic on the stories and opinions that traditional media provide."

In The Guardian, Jonathan Freedland pointed out that the abusive, vitriolic nature of many blogs had turned the blogosphere into a "claustrophobic environment, appealing
chiefly to a certain kind of aggressive, point-scoring male, and utterly off-putting to everyone else”.

Freedland’s crucial point is that the anonymity made possible by web protocols is at fault. People find it easy to behave badly if nobody knows who they are.

This, in fact, is a problem built into the fabric of the internet. Its design was based on trust among scientists who knew each other. The network itself was, and remains, open and flexible. But, as the web exploded, this made life easy for harassers, abusers, spammers and hackers, who could easily conceal their identity.

This can be life-threatening. Blogger Kathy Sierra (headrush.typepad.com) had to go into hiding after death threats on other blogs. As a result of all these abuses, millions are being spent on plans for a total re-engineering of the web to make it secure in the real human world of criminality and aggression.

Should you care? At the moment, blogs are largely for other bloggers and social-networking sites largely for teenagers. Web2.0 is a large but still specialised phenomenon. But yes, you should care. First, because this is indeed the future; and, second, because the debates started by Keen, Kamm and Freedland are too fundamental and too big to ignore.

To begin at the beginning: the precise nature of Web 2.0 is the subject of some head-clutching net theology, but its important attribute is user-generated content.

"Letting regular people participate in what was previously the domain of the few," is how Chris Anderson puts it. Anderson is the editor of Wired magazine and author of The Long Tail, one of the many bibles of Web 2.0. Blogs and social-networking sites allow anybody to publish anything they want.

There are more than 70 million blogs in the world and hundreds of millions of users of MySpace, Facebook, Bebo and the rest, and as all of these numbers are growing rapidly, we are creating a world in which everybody can talk - or, more commonly, shout - about themselves to everybody else. This is already changing politics, the record industry, print media and advertising, and will change, perhaps to the point of destruction, almost everything else.

Web prophets tend to celebrate this revolutionary transformation in straight libertarian terms: it gives people freedom. But simple libertarianism is a meaningless and easy creed. It takes little or no account of Isaiah Berlin’s crucial distinction between "freedom to" and "freedom from", the latter requiring external controls of the individual.

Or, as Kris Kristofferson put it rather more resonantly: "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose."

In fact, the problem of blog abuse, which is now seen as damaging the entire medium, has led some of the most senior web prophets to dilute dumb libertarianism. Tim O’Reilly, entrepreneur and uber-blogger, and Jimmy Wales, founder of Wikipedia, have come up with a six-point code of conduct for blogs.
Bloggers adhering to this code will carry a badge of compliance on their sites. Whether this works or not, it shows some awareness of criticisms such as those of Kamm and Keen. But it does nothing to allay Keen's fears of a fundamental undermining of our culture.

Is he right? There are many ways to answer that question, but one good place to start is another Web 2.0 bible, James Surowiecki's *The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many Are Smarter Than the Few*.

This is based on the insight that the expression of many opinions is a better way of attaining either the truth or the practical than the expression of just a few.

At its heart is a famous anecdote about Francis Galton, Darwin's cousin. He went to an agricultural show and watched a competition to guess the weight of an ox. Galton, a statistician, gathered together all the guesses and averaged them. The average was almost exactly right; the guesses of even the most expert farmers were all wrong.

This is not to advocate simple populism, in which every judgment is based on surges in mass opinion. Rather, a mediating process - such as that of Galton or that of the market - derives a view from averaging out popular sentiment. If Web 2.0 expands the number of guesses by hundreds of millions, then we can pretty confidently know what the ox weighs.

Such an idea is an enormous threat to our existing political culture. As master blogger Daniel Finkelstein (timesonline.typepad.com) says, Web 2.0's version of the wisdom of crowds undermines our political parties. They were founded when there was limited shelf space for comment and access. But now the shelf space is effectively infinite. We can all take part all of the time, and individual politicians will increasingly break away from party discipline to address the online masses directly.

"Established media provide expertise," Finkelstein says, "but it's a small sample. Some politicians resist this, but saying it's a bad thing won't stop it happening."

Or, as smart blogger Tim Worstall puts it: "Knowledge and expertise are local, and the x hundreds of thousands or millions of bloggers will know more in detail on each and every subject than the 500 or 1000 who work for a media organisation. There's thus something of a pressure on that smaller number to raise their game."

On culture, Keen is on firm ground. Cultural continuity depends on arbitrary authority. There is no absolute justification for teaching children Shakespeare or maths; there is simply the necessity to teach them something that will place them in their world and show them the height of what we believe is the highest.

But arbitrary authority is anathema to Web2.0. It is predicated not just on the wisdom of the crowd but on its power. So, Wikipedia can be written and rewritten by everybody who uses it. Applying Surowiecki's argument, this should mean it is the most accurate encyclopedia in the world.

But, of course, it isn't, because, in this case, the wisdom of the crowd fails utterly. Wikipedia fails because, though the crowd guessed the weight of the ox, it didn't
make the ox weigh that much. Its weight was a fact out there in the world. An elite -
scale-makers and compilers of measuring systems - were the judges of this, not the
masses.

Wikipedia has a dodgy relationship with any kind of elite. Essjay, a prolific
contributor who was said to be a professor with degrees in theology and canon law,
turned out to be Ryan Jordan, a 24-year-old college dropout from Kentucky. Jordan
exploited the trust structure of the internet technology to pretend he was somebody
else, to steal the authority of academe. And this brings me to the heart of the matter.

In 1993, a cartoon by Peter Steiner appeared in The New Yorker. It showed a dog at a
computer screen explaining to another dog on the floor beside him that "on the
internet, nobody knows you're a dog".

Of all the things ever said about the wired world, this was the most prophetic. For
Finkelstein is right to see that the most important part of Freedland's argument is his
complaint about anonymity. The simple ability to conceal one's identity is the deep
flaw in the arguments of all Web 2.0's libertarian boosters.

Psychologists have long been aware that the more people are distanced from each
other, the easier they find it to do them harm. This degrades bloggery. But, more
important, it also threatens all forms of authority.

All Western wisdom is based on identity. Advocates and their critics can be identified
and their ideas formally tested. This has nothing to do with the statistics of crowds
and everything to do with the authority of the person. Take that away and truth and
judgment become fictions; Shakespeare is dead and the ox can weigh anything.

Freedom has its uses. I'm a blogger, and I say what I like. But, in the end, Web 2.0
will only be good for us if, somehow, it succeeds in evolving towards an identity-
based discourse. All else is mere anarchy.

_The Sunday Times_