



## A Keen Eye on Technology

AALL 2014 Annual Meeting & Conference keynote speaker Andrew Keen analyzes how technology is affecting law librarians' resources—and responsibilities

**A**fter founding Audiocafe.com in 1995, Internet entrepreneur Andrew Keen subsequently built the site into a popular first generation Internet company. Keen currently writes a column for CNN, hosts the popular “Keen On” TechCrunch chat show, serves as a regular commentator for global news outlets, and has written two books on social media and Internet use, “The Cult of the Amateur: How Today’s Internet is Killing Our Culture” and “Digital Vertigo: How Today’s Online Social Revolution is Dividing, Diminishing and Disorienting Us.” The acclaimed speaker, who often addresses how digital technologies impact 21st century business, education, and society, will be the keynote speaker at AALL’s Beyond Boundaries 107th Annual Meeting & Conference, which will be held in San Antonio July 12-15.

AALL recently chatted with Keen about how the Internet has evolved, how it connects and disconnects us—and how technology is changing the law librarian’s role.

**You founded Audiocafe in 1995. How has Internet use changed since then?**

In 1995, the Internet was entirely different. The first difference would be bandwidth—when you first accessed the Internet, you had to take the plug out of the telephone and put it into your computer. It was really slow—it didn’t seem so at the time, but if we went back to that now, it would be unimaginable. [Today’s] kids have grown up with ubiquitous broadband, cell phones, and a network that’s incredibly easy to access. You have to go hide in a cave to avoid the Internet these days, for better or worse.

The second thing is, when I started Audiocafe, I had to hire a very professional team of web developers to build the site and the content. I knew exactly what I wanted, an informational news network, but it cost hundreds of pounds. Today, you can get capital and angel investors in about 10 minutes.

The third difference is, back then, no one was on the network. When I told

my parents I was going to start a business, I think they thought I was insane—I probably was. In 1995, the vast majority of people online were university people and [tech] geeks. With more cell phone access and devices like iPads, it’s become more ubiquitous.

**You’ve written that “the reality of social media is an architecture of human isolation, rather than one of community.” Disciples of the “Silicon Valley religion” of sharing everything might call that blasphemous. What are they missing (or misunderstanding)?**

On one hand, it’s obvious this technology can be good for people who live away from communities or are struggling to define themselves; I don’t want to say the Internet has no positives. Who am I to say a grandmother shouldn’t communicate with her grandchildren on Skype? In many ways, the Internet has, no doubt, created connections, but I’m not sure if it’s created a community.

Searching for community on the Internet tends to be reflections of

ourselves. When we go on Facebook, we're not really building a community; they're communities of self. Websites tend to be just platforms and opportunities for people to express themselves.

It's very hard to build a real community; I don't think it really offers a genuine alternative to community. The communal aspect tends to be a reflection of what we want. With social networks, there's no commitment; it's not like living in a community where you have to have commitments and responsibilities. Globalization and more mobility enable us to live a more mobile isolated life.

**The drive to have an ever-growing social media presence pervades the culture of many institutions, including universities, public libraries, and law firms. What advice can you offer for managing the expectations of what this kind of presence can deliver?**

I can see a lot of value for libraries online and in social networks. Building networks of people, I would think, is absolutely key to libraries—they should be on all the networks but know what they are and how to use them.

They should understand that many of these networks are short-lived; it's hard to know [which are]. Everyone talks about how many people are on Facebook, but it seems to be becoming unfashionable with younger people. Google poured money into Google+ and now seems to be shutting it down. You need to place your bets carefully; you should have apps and websites, but shouldn't rely on [any one] . . . there are no magic bullets in social media. What is popular today may be forgotten in six months or a year, and librarians tend to think in longer-term cycles.

**How has online entrepreneurship changed in recent years—and how does it stand to affect how informational content is exchanged in the future?**

We're seeing it, with moderate success, in newspapers, for example—newspapers originally gave all the content away for free in the 1990s; they thought they could make money on advertising and assumed that was the best business model, but because of commoditized advertising and driving down prices, that wasn't the case. *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Financial Times* understand that is the only way to survive, and we're also seeing this in media and entertainment with the success of online video networks like Netflix and Hulu, which are paid

content subscription models, and music with Spotify. These are viable models, and they work.

The only real problem, though, is with the creative community. The problem is the revenue coming back to the artist is so minimal that it's de-stabilizing the ability for an artist to make a living. When it comes to libraries and content, it's the same with writers—eventually you may have a subscription model for writers where you can have all the books for \$10 a month, which will be very attractive to consumers, and maybe entrepreneurs can make it work if they do deals with publishers—but whether or not revenue flows back to the writer is another issue. [But] the paid subscription model is the only future at the moment. The free model doesn't work. The sell by unit in the long-term doesn't really work.

**How far will society allow the erosion of privacy to progress? Has there been any pushback to the more obvious intrusions (e.g., being marketed to based on browsing history)?**

I'm writing another book that will feature this—[things may shift as] more people come to understand that the fatal flaw of the Internet lies in its business model. Google and Facebook give away stuff for free and build advertising around it; however, it's one thing to know that and another to come up with an alternative. I think we have to start paying for content. It's easy for me to say, "People need to do it." But we live in a culture where consumers think they should have everything for free. It's going to take a lot more data catastrophes for us to finally wake up to this.

**You've previously echoed MIT Professor Sherry Turkle's opinion that "We expect more from technology and less from each other." What concerns does that mentality present? How do you see it evolving in the future?**

I think we've seen a shift. I wrote my book, *Cult of the Amateur*, in 2007—I don't want to say I was the only critic of technology at that point because there have always been critics, but I think now, more and more people have become critical of what's happening. The balance has shifted. People like Turkle and [technology and culture author] Nicholas Carr increasingly reflect the concerns of mainstream people, and I think that's a good thing because none of those people are hostile about technology; they understand it and some of its drawbacks.

The other thing I think we'll see will be a generational thing—I've got teenagers; they've grown up [with] technology, and they love their iPhones and iPads. I think their kids will react as if we're kind of in the 1950s now, and there will be a 1960s type of rebellion against technology that hasn't happened yet.

**In a *New York Times* interview, you said that "data is the new oil, and that's where the value is." Librarians would argue that it's not the data, but the person who can manage (filter, analyze, apply) the data who brings the value. How do you see the role of the information professional evolving?**

The thing with the Internet is that it's kind of tone deaf. You can't make the kind of jokes you can make with a friend and understand that the friend will take it into context—particularly jokes about race, sex, or identity. You can touch on politics, but you need to understand that you're talking to an audience that doesn't know you, and you don't know it. I think librarians are mature enough to understand that, but there are people who have essentially wrecked their lives through one stupid Tweet that was probably a joke about something, which is entirely inappropriate. The Internet doesn't really have a sense of humor. I can be controversial and say slightly inappropriate things because that's my brand; librarians can't.

**What can information professionals do to highlight and maximize their role so that the end user knows all that they're doing?**

They have to understand that they are in some ways an acronym—they're on the front lines of all these changes to the old world of gatekeepers and checkpoints, where they controlled the library and all this knowledge. That's rapidly gone away—any kid can go online and search for stuff. Libraries need to rethink themselves and their relationship with technology machines and artificial intelligence. They'll always offer value; on their own, the machines are still very inadequate. Librarians can be curators for artificial intelligence, just as they were for books and traditional human intellect. But they need to rethink themselves dramatically; they won't survive, otherwise. That doesn't mean there won't be libraries—but there will be fewer and fewer libraries. That doesn't mean the challenge and need for curation of complex information will go away. ■