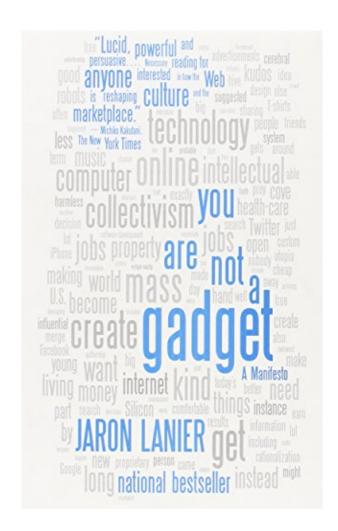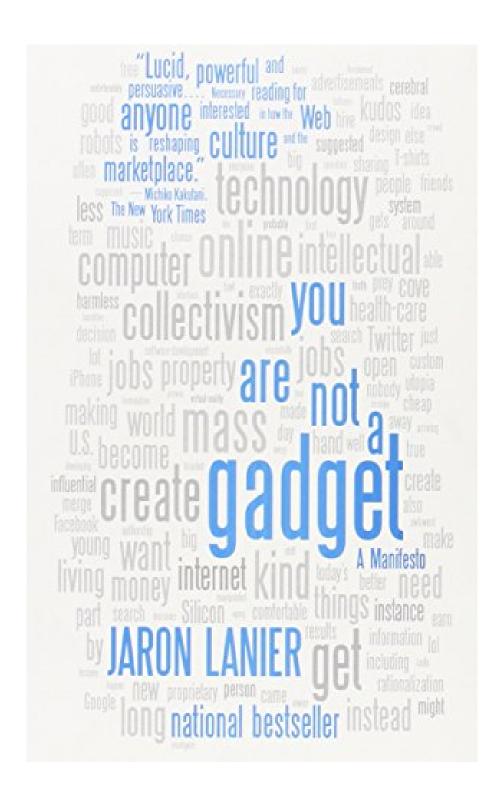# YOU ARE NOT A GADGET: A MANIFESTO BY JARON LANIER

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A Q&A with Author Jaron Lanier

Question: As one of the first visionaries in Silicon Valley, you saw the initial promise the internet held. Two decades later, how has the internet transformed our lives for the better?

Jaron Lanier: The answer is different in different parts of the world. In the industrialized world, the rise of the Web has happily demonstrated that vast numbers of people are interested in being expressive to each other and the world at large. This is something that I and my colleagues used to boldly predict, but we were often shouted down, as the mainstream opinion during the age of television's dominance was that people were mostly passive consumers who could not be expected to express themselves. In the developing world, the Internet, along with mobile phones, has had an even more dramatic effect, empowering vast classes of people in new ways by allowing them to coordinate with each other. That has been a very good thing for the most part, though it has also enabled militants and other bad actors.

Question: You argue the web isn't living up to its initial promise. How has the internet transformed our lives for the worse?

Jaron Lanier: The problem is not inherent in the Internet or the Web. Deterioration only began around the turn of the century with the rise of so-called "Web 2.0" designs. These designs valued the information content of the web over individuals. It became fashionable to aggregate the expressions of people into dehumanized data. There are so many things wrong with this that it takes a whole book to summarize them. Here's just one problem: It screws the middle class. Only the aggregator (like Google, for instance) gets rich, while the actual producers of content get poor. This is why newspapers are dying. It might sound like it is only a problem for creative people, like musicians or writers, but eventually it will be a problem for everyone. When robots can repair roads someday, will people have jobs programming those robots, or will the human programmers be so aggregated that they essentially work for free, like today's recording musicians? Web 2.0 is a formula to kill the middle class and undo centuries of social progress.

Question: You say that we've devalued intellectual achievement. How?

Jaron Lanier: On one level, the Internet has become anti-intellectual because Web 2.0 collectivism has killed the individual voice. It is increasingly disheartening to write about any topic in depth these days, because people will only read what the first link from a search engine directs them to, and that will typically be the collective expression of the Wikipedia. Or, if the issue is contentious, people will congregate into partisan online bubbles in which their views are reinforced. I don't think a collective voice can be effective for many topics, such as history--and neither can a partisan mob. Collectives have a power to distort history in a way that damages minority viewpoints and calcifies the art of interpretation. Only the quirkiness of considered individual expression can cut through the nonsense of mob--and that is the reason intellectual activity is important.

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Question: Why has the idea that "the content wants to be free" (and the unrelenting embrace of the concept) been such a setback? What dangers do you see this leading to?

Jaron Lanier: The original turn of phrase was "Information wants to be free." And the problem with that is that it anthropomorphizes information. Information doesn't deserve to be free. It is an abstract tool; a useful fantasy, a nothing. It is nonexistent until and unless a person experiences it in a useful way. What we have done in the last decade is give information more rights than are given to people. If you express yourself on the internet, what you say will be copied, mashed up, anonymized, analyzed, and turned into bricks in someone else's fortress to support an advertising scheme. However, the information, the abstraction, that represents you is protected within that fortress and is absolutely sacrosanct, the new holy of holies. You never see it and are not allowed to touch it. This is exactly the wrong set of values.

The idea that information is alive in its own right is a metaphysical claim made by people who hope to become immortal by being uploaded into a computer someday. It is part of what should be understood as a

new religion. That might sound like an extreme claim, but go visit any computer science lab and you'll find books about "the Singularity," which is the supposed future event when the blessed uploading is to take place. A weird cult in the world of technology has done damage to culture at large.

Question: In You Are Not a Gadget, you argue that idea that the collective is smarter than the individual is wrong. Why is this?

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(Photo © Jonathan Sprague)

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A NATIONAL BESTSELLER

A programmer, musician, and father of virtual reality technology, Jaron Lanier was a pioneer in digital media, and among the first to predict the revolutionary changes it would bring to our commerce and culture. Now, with the Web influencing virtually every aspect of our lives, he offers this provocative critique of how digital design is shaping society, for better and for worse.

Informed by Lanier's experience and expertise as a computer scientist, You Are Not a Gadget discusses the technical and cultural problems that have unwittingly risen from programming choices—such as the nature of user identity—that were "locked-in" at the birth of digital media and considers what a future based on current design philosophies will bring. With the proliferation of social networks, cloud-based data storage systems, and Web 2.0 designs that elevate the "wisdom" of mobs and computer algorithms over the intelligence and wisdom of individuals, his message has never been more urgent.

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A critical take on Web 2.0: People first
By Michael A. Duvernois
"Technology criticism," the author writes, "should not be left to the Luddites." Jaron Lanier is certainly no Luddite, but in this "manifesto" he blasts the Web 2.0 mentality, highlights long-standing technology lock-ins, and ranges far and wide in his criticisms of the Internet, computing, and the cultures surrounding the two today.

The core of his argument is that the achievements of the Web 2.0 collaborations are neither exciting, nor new. "Let's suppose that, back in the 1980s, I had said, `In a quarter century, when the digital revolution has made great progress and computer chips are millions of times faster than they are now, humanity will finally win the prize of being able to write a new encyclopedia and a new version of UNIX!' It would," he writes, "have sounded utterly pathetic." He's referring to Wikipedia and Linux, two clear successes of collaborative construction. And furthermore, the intellectual work of those thousands of people have been undervalued, in fact, they're unpaid volunteers. The middle classes have spent their hours working without paid to build wonderful constructs for the profits of major companies. Hmmm...as I write this book review, unpaid, with Amazon looking to earn money from selling more copies of this book...

Ranging further across the Web 2.0 field, Jaron notes the Facebook and Myspace pages in their prescribed formats with individuals reduced to favorite books, movies, five options for politics, and six options for relationship status. Other parts look at technology lock-in, with the example of MIDI. It was developed in the early 1980s for keyboard synthesizer control and output, and reproduces the nuances of a keyboard but not, for example, a violin. It would be hard to get support for a new, broader tool. "A thousand years from now, when a descendant of ours is traveling at relativistic speeds to explore new star systems, she will probably be annoyed by some awful beepy MIDI-driven music to alert her that the antimatter filter needs to be recalibrated."

Well, I certainly don't agree with everything Jaron has to say, even if I do fondly recall the handmade (with blink tags) web pages from before the AOL deluge (the September without end) when the masses discovered the Internet. There's a lot of crap online, but then again, there's a lot of crap everywhere. I can happily share my family photos over Facebook with people who barely are computer literate, and still be critical of the silly lock-ins of the Facebook pages. Lanier is not a Luddite though, he doesn't want us to smash the digital world, but wants to criticize it to make it better. Nothing wrong with that, whether we agree with his criticism or not.

Thought provoking and worthy of your time.
By Robert Busko
In his book You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto, Jaron Lanier becomes a solitary voice in the wilderness shouting as loudly as he can that all is not well with the virtual world nor with the tools that make the virtual world possible....software and computers. That this book was written by an insider from the world of the Internet should get everyone's attention.

Jaron Lanier is a household name for those who follow the world of computers and virtual reality and his book is nothing more than a manifesto warning us that there is a dark side to the Internet. Even innocuous websites such as Facebook and Google, "lords of the cloud" do not escape Lanier's expose. "Emphasizing the crowd means de-emphasizing individual humans" and that, in the end, leads to "mob" behavior. Utterly true.

As I flipped through the book, the point that resonated most loudly to me was the impact `anonymity' has had on our virtual world (and maybe the real world as well). I can remember visiting a chat room that was dedicated to "Books and Literature" in 2000 or 2001. As a librarian I was naturally drawn to a space that I thought would be filled with others like me who had a love of the written word and for good books. Did that assumption back fire? You bet! What I found was a chat area filled with virtual people who wanted to chat about anything but books and literature. If I were to post a question about what people were reading or what they thought of a given book I was torn (virtually) from limb to limb. Having served in the military I have a pretty good operational understanding of foul language, and I'm pretty good at throwing the words around when necessary. However, that this language would be used in that particular venue by people who could remain anonymous was a shock. I'm pretty certain that most of the visitors to that website hadn't read a book in years and had no problem violating the most basic rules of civility. Lanier is correct when he argues that this is not a step in the right direction. (Please forgive this personal observation)

Obviously I'm a fan of the virtual world. I post reviews online for free (which is another point Lanier makes) but the joy isn't the posting of reviews but in reading the books; real books. What Lanier has to say should be of interest to all of us.

You Are Not a Gadget is written for the ordinary reader with a minimal background in computers. Lanier floats from idea to idea not necessarily fully exploring a point, but instead simply raising an issue and then moving on. Very effective!

I predict that You Are Not a Gadget is destined to become a cultural icon in the future. We now point to books such as Silent Spring by Rachel Carson and I'm Ok, You're Ok by Dr. Thomas Harris as books that changed society and altered the future. I suspect that You Are Not a Gadget may become that type of sign post.

I highly recommend.

Peace always.

You are a fluke of the universe. Take full advantage of it.
By David Wineberg
What Jaron Lanier does is take us up 50,000 feet and allow us to view things with perspective. He says we have been overwhelmed by the unnoticed "lock-in" and simply adjust and reduce ourselves to fit the requirements of online dating, social media, forums, and the software we employ. Web 2.0 is homogenizing humanity, taking us down to the lowest common denominator instead of allowing or encouraging us to bloom in different directions. Everything we now "enjoy" seems to be backward looking - music is sampled and retro, news is criticized mercilessly, but very few are creating it any more, relationships are Tweets...

It sounds like Lanier recommends friends don't let friends communicate via Facebook - they do it on the phone or in person. But the direction we are taking instead reduces interaction, kills creativity, journalism, music, science....it's not as pretty as predicted.

These are truly valuable criticisms, and this is an important, if flawed book. Flawed because after a hundred page pounding of logic and evidence, Lanier spends the second hundred pages telling us how wonderful it is to be a scientist and play with humans and cuttlefish. I was particularly annoyed with a gratuitous couple of paragraphs devoted to swearing, which which he says might be connected to parts of the brain controlling orifices and obscenity.

Well, to my knowledge, swearing is purely cultural, not physiological. In Quebec, the worst swearing is against the Catholic Church, Translated into English "Christ Tabernacle" sounds like something WC Fields said to skirt the censors. But it's the most vile thing you can say in polite conversation in Montreal. On the other hand Motherf----r doesn't translate into French at all. And what's any of this got to do with online reductionism? Zilch - is my point. The last 100 pages is full of such diversions.

Others have pointed to other sections they disagree with, and they all seem to occur in the last half of the book. But don't let that deter you, as it distracted him. The original message is important. People create. Software does not. Software restricts. Don't leave anonymous contributions. Build a creative website of your own design. Probe deeply and uniquely - beyond Wikipedia. Reflect before you blog.

Lanier says our humanity and creativity are being put at risk by the miasma foisted on us by the incredible leveling machine of the internet. Instead of becoming exciting, the internet has become boring. Instead of creating new music, it has assassinated the entire industry. Instead of bringing people together, it lets them off the hook. That's worth exploring, and for about 100 pages, Lanier does a grand job of it.

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A Q&A with Author Jaron Lanier

Question: As one of the first visionaries in Silicon Valley, you saw the initial promise the internet held. Two decades later, how has the internet transformed our lives for the better?

Jaron Lanier: The answer is different in different parts of the world. In the industrialized world, the rise of the Web has happily demonstrated that vast numbers of people are interested in being expressive to each other and the world at large. This is something that I and my colleagues used to boldly predict, but we were often shouted down, as the mainstream opinion during the age of television's dominance was that people were mostly passive consumers who could not be expected to express themselves. In the developing world, the Internet, along with mobile phones, has had an even more dramatic effect, empowering vast classes of people in new ways by allowing them to coordinate with each other. That has been a very good thing for the most part, though it has also enabled militants and other bad actors.

Question: You argue the web isn't living up to its initial promise. How has the internet transformed our lives for the worse?

Jaron Lanier: The problem is not inherent in the Internet or the Web. Deterioration only began around the turn of the century with the rise of so-called "Web 2.0" designs. These designs valued the information

content of the web over individuals. It became fashionable to aggregate the expressions of people into dehumanized data. There are so many things wrong with this that it takes a whole book to summarize them. Here's just one problem: It screws the middle class. Only the aggregator (like Google, for instance) gets rich, while the actual producers of content get poor. This is why newspapers are dying. It might sound like it is only a problem for creative people, like musicians or writers, but eventually it will be a problem for everyone. When robots can repair roads someday, will people have jobs programming those robots, or will the human programmers be so aggregated that they essentially work for free, like today's recording musicians? Web 2.0 is a formula to kill the middle class and undo centuries of social progress.

Question: You say that we've devalued intellectual achievement. How?

Jaron Lanier: On one level, the Internet has become anti-intellectual because Web 2.0 collectivism has killed the individual voice. It is increasingly disheartening to write about any topic in depth these days, because people will only read what the first link from a search engine directs them to, and that will typically be the collective expression of the Wikipedia. Or, if the issue is contentious, people will congregate into partisan online bubbles in which their views are reinforced. I don't think a collective voice can be effective for many topics, such as history--and neither can a partisan mob. Collectives have a power to distort history in a way that damages minority viewpoints and calcifies the art of interpretation. Only the quirkiness of considered individual expression can cut through the nonsense of mob--and that is the reason intellectual activity is important.

On another level, when someone does try to be expressive in a collective, Web 2.0 context, she must prioritize standing out from the crowd. To do anything else is to be invisible. Therefore, people become artificially caustic, flattering, or otherwise manipulative.

Web 2.0 adherents might respond to these objections by claiming that I have confused individual expression with intellectual achievement. This is where we find our greatest point of disagreement. I am amazed by the power of the collective to enthrall people to the point of blindness. Collectivists adore a computer operating system called LINUX, for instance, but it is really only one example of a descendant of a 1970s technology called UNIX. If it weren't produced by a collective, there would be nothing remarkable about it at all.

Meanwhile, the truly remarkable designs that couldn't have existed 30 years ago, like the iPhone, all come out of "closed" shops where individuals create something and polish it before it is released to the public. Collectivists confuse ideology with achievement.

Question: Why has the idea that "the content wants to be free" (and the unrelenting embrace of the concept) been such a setback? What dangers do you see this leading to?

Jaron Lanier: The original turn of phrase was "Information wants to be free." And the problem with that is that it anthropomorphizes information. Information doesn't deserve to be free. It is an abstract tool; a useful fantasy, a nothing. It is nonexistent until and unless a person experiences it in a useful way. What we have done in the last decade is give information more rights than are given to people. If you express yourself on the internet, what you say will be copied, mashed up, anonymized, analyzed, and turned into bricks in someone else's fortress to support an advertising scheme. However, the information, the abstraction, that represents you is protected within that fortress and is absolutely sacrosanct, the new holy of holies. You never see it and are not allowed to touch it. This is exactly the wrong set of values.

The idea that information is alive in its own right is a metaphysical claim made by people who hope to become immortal by being uploaded into a computer someday. It is part of what should be understood as a new religion. That might sound like an extreme claim, but go visit any computer science lab and you'll find books about "the Singularity," which is the supposed future event when the blessed uploading is to take

place. A weird cult in the world of technology has done damage to culture at large.

Question: In You Are Not a Gadget, you argue that idea that the collective is smarter than the individual is wrong. Why is this?

Jaron Lanier: There are some cases where a group of people can do a better job of solving certain kinds of problems than individuals. One example is setting a price in a marketplace. Another example is an election process to choose a politician. All such examples involve what can be called optimization, where the concerns of many individuals are reconciled. There are other cases that involve creativity and imagination. A crowd process generally fails in these cases. The phrase "Design by Committee" is treated as derogatory for good reason. That is why a collective of programmers can copy UNIX but cannot invent the iPhone.

In the book, I go into considerably more detail about the differences between the two types of problem solving. Creativity requires periodic, temporary "encapsulation" as opposed to the kind of constant global openness suggested by the slogan "information wants to be free." Biological cells have walls, academics employ temporary secrecy before they publish, and real authors with real voices might want to polish a text before releasing it. In all these cases, encapsulation is what allows for the possibility of testing and feedback that enables a quest for excellence. To be constantly diffused in a global mush is to embrace mundanity.

(Photo © Jonathan Sprague)

From Publishers Weekly
Computer scientist and Internet guru Lanier's fascinating and provocative full-length exploration of the Internet's problems and potential is destined to become a must-read for both critics and advocates of online-based technology and culture. Lanier is best known for creating and pioneering the use of the revolutionary computer technology that he named virtual reality. Yet in his first book, Lanier takes a step back and critiques the current digital technology, more deeply exploring the ideas from his famous 2000 Wired magazine article, One-Half of a Manifesto, which argued against more wildly optimistic views of what computers and the Internet could accomplish. His main target here is Web 2.0, the current dominant digital design concept commonly referred to as open culture. Lanier forcefully argues that Web 2.0 sites such as Wikipedia undervalue humans in favor of anonymity and crowd identity. He brilliantly shows how large Web 2.0–based information aggregators such as Amazon.com—as well as proponents of free music file sharing—have created a hive mind mentality emphasizing quantity over quality. But he concludes with a passionate and hopeful argument for a new digital humanism in which radical technologies do not deny the specialness of personhood. (Jan.)

From Booklist
Starred Review Lanier is the digital pioneer who coined the term virtual reality, but for all his computer expertise and zeal, he now says, "not so fast." A composer, musician, and artist as well as a computer scientist, Lanier is concerned that the "digital hive is growing at the expense of individuality." As he advocates for human concerns over digital imperatives in a book as invigorating for its excellent prose as for its striking disclosures and cogent arguments, Lanier describes the phenomenon he calls "lock in," which leaves us stuck with flawed computer programs and skewed search engines. Moving into the social arena, Lanier dismantles such cyberfantasies as the Singularity, draws the connection between cloud computing and financial irresponsibility, ponders "gadget fetishism" and cybercrime, and, most electrifyingly, critiques online culture's rampant reductiveness and disdain for quality and originality. Lanier is particularly incisive in his assessment of the Web's role in eradicating paying jobs and undermining entire careers while simultaneously bombarding the now-imperiled middle class with advertising. Beware, Lanier says, of

"cybernetic totalism." Don't be bamboozled and devalued. The Web can be a better place. Lanier's bold and brilliant protest against cyberhype and exploitation is a tonic and necessary call for humanism. --Donna Seaman

It can be among your early morning readings *You Are Not A Gadget: A Manifesto By Jaron Lanier* This is a soft documents book that can be survived downloading and install from online publication. As understood, in this innovative age, innovation will certainly reduce you in doing some tasks. Even it is just reading the existence of book soft file of You Are Not A Gadget: A Manifesto By Jaron Lanier can be extra attribute to open. It is not just to open up as well as save in the gizmo. This time in the morning and various other spare time are to read the book You Are Not A Gadget: A Manifesto By Jaron Lanier