# You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto

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Jaron Lanier, a Silicon Valley visionary since the 1980s, was among the first to predict the revolutionary changes the World Wide Web would bring to commerce and culture. Now, in his first book, written more than two decades after the web was created, Lanier offers this provocative and cautionary look at the way it is transforming our lives for better and for worse.

The current design and function of the web have become so familiar that it is easy to forget that they grew out of programming decisions made decades ago. The web's first designers made crucial choices (such as making one's presence anonymous) that have had enormous-and often unintended-consequences. What's more, these designs quickly became "locked in," a permanent part of the web's very structure.

Lanier discusses the technical and cultural problems that can grow out of poorly considered digital design and warns that our financial markets and sites like Wikipedia, Facebook, and Twitter are elevating the "wisdom" of mobs and computer algorithms over the intelligence and judgment of individuals.

Lanier also shows:
How 1960s antigovernment paranoia influenced the design of the online world and enabled trolling and trivialization in online discourse
How file sharing is killing the artistic middle class;
How a belief in a technological "rapture" motivates some of the most influential technologists
Why a new humanistic technology is necessary.

Controversial and fascinating, You Are Not a Gadget is a deeply felt defense of the individual from an author uniquely qualified to comment on the way technology interacts with our culture.

## Amazon Best Books of the Month, January 2010:

For the most part, Web 2.0--Internet technologies that encourage interactivity, customization, and participation--is hailed as an emerging Golden Age of information sharing and collaborative achievement, the strength of democratized wisdom. Jaron Lanier isn't buying it. In You Are Not a Gadget, the longtime tech guru/visionary/dreadlocked genius (and progenitor of virtual reality) argues the opposite: that unfettered--and anonymous--ability to comment results in cynical mob behavior, the shouting-down of reasoned argument, and the devaluation of individual accomplishment. Lanier traces the roots of today's Web 2.0 philosophies and architectures (e.g. he posits that Web anonymity is the result of '60s paranoia), persuasively documents their shortcomings, and provides alternate paths to "locked-in" paradigms. Though its strongly-stated opinions run against the bias of popular assumptions, You Are Not a Gadget is a manifesto, not a screed; Lanier seeks a useful, respectful dialogue about how we can shape technology to fit culture's needs, rather than the way technology currently shapes us.

## 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)
Jaron Lanier is known as the father of virtual reality technology and has worked on the interface between computer science and medicine, physics, and neuroscience. He lives in Berkeley, California.
Other Books
The Emergence of the Digital Humanities, The past decade has seen a profound shift in our collective understanding of the digital network. What was once understood to be a transcendent virtual reality is now experienced as a ubiquitous grid of data that we move through and interact with every day, raising new questions about the social, locative, embodied, and object-oriented nature of our experience in the networked world. In The Emergence of the Digital Humanities, Steven E. Jones examines this shift in our relationship to digital technology and the ways that it has affected humanities scholarship and the academy more broadly. Based on the premise that the network is now everywhere rather than merely "out there," Jones links together seemingly disparate cultural events—the essential features of popular social media, the rise of motion-control gaming and mobile platforms, the controversy over the "gamification" of everyday life, the spatial turn, fabrication and 3D printing, and electronic publishing—and argues that cultural responses to changes in technology provide an essential context for understanding the emergence of the digital humanities as a new field of study in this millennium.
⦿ ⦿ ⦿ ⦿ ⦿ . Jaron Lanier, You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto (New York: Vintage, 2010); Sherry Turkle, Alone Together: Why We Expect Morefrom Technology and Lessfrom Each Other (New York: Basic Books, 2012); Nicholas Carr, The Shallows: What the …"