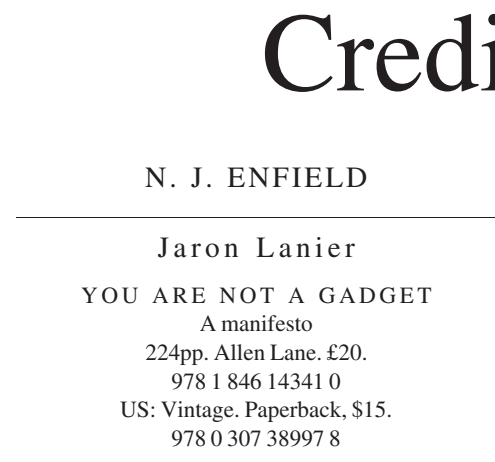




“Exit-Wall” (2010), an installation by Cécile Colle and Ralf Nuhn

There are many high hopes for what the digital revolution may have brought, but for Jaron Lanier, romantic cyber-pioneer and passionate advocate for human individualism, things have gone seriously wrong. In *You Are Not a Gadget*, every bit a manifesto, he rails against it all: the cloud and its powerful lords, the long tail, global anonymity, second-order culture, groupthink, the hive mind, cybernetic totalism, digital Maoism, and the dark age it will all bring. From Lanier’s perspective as an early 1980s trailblazer of Virtual Reality, today’s web 2.0 is a “torrent of petty designs”. He is a disappointed man. Those who finally have their chance to shine are squandering it by Tweeting about their favourite reality shows, posting schlock on YouTube, or throwing away their authorship in anonymous contributions to Wikipedia. At the same time, those who have commandeered the online infrastructure are harnessing the biggest crowds of suckers ever, and may soon be perpetrating the most irresponsible forms of mass exploitation in history.

Lanier’s book is a sustained and textured attack on current directions of dominant culture in the regime of the internet. It is a refreshingly personal book, often idealistic, and not uncommonly maddening. But mostly it is an eye-opener, thanks especially to Lanier’s uncanny talents for questioning authority and thinking unconventionally. It’s pitched as a sorely needed corrective to a popular discourse of the web as a giant love-in where everyone can grow and profit. But in manifesto style, it is more about asserting a position and less about engaging with the other side’s arguments. Conspicuously absent are references to the careful scholarship of pro-commons authors like the legal



scholars Yochai Benkler, Lawrence Lessig, and Eben Moglen, whose arguments suggest that an overly individualist stance – as underlies strong copyright laws – is not just antisocial but counter-productive. Moglen even has a manifesto of his own (“The dot-Communist Manifesto” of 2003), in which he advocates “abolition of all forms of private property in ideas”. But Lanier sees wool over our eyes and he wants to pull it off. His mission is to defend the creative agency of the individual, and his contention is that collectivism in Web culture is a real danger to this.

The anonymity that the Web often enables, or even encourages – as in the case of Wikipedia and other crowd-edited services – has the power to separate an individual from the fruits of his or her creative work. When the system towers above us, says Lanier, there is a “reduced expectation of what a person can become”. What is the notion of “person” that is at issue here? Lanier draws on a commonsense dualist view that each individual human body is inhabited by an equally individual spirit, where this spirit-body coin is

Credit tests

the unit of currency in the social world. To see what defines a transaction involving this human social unit, just follow the distribution of entitlements and obligations. Lanier’s philosophy seems obvious: If my work is worthy of credit, I should be entitled to get that credit (bylines = good, Wikipedia = bad); if my work is deserving of blame, I should be obligated to shoulder that blame (transparency = good, trolls = bad). It’s a view of personhood that gels well with modern intuitions in a culture of individualism, and no doubt with the hopes of many, but this doesn’t make it any less an ideology, or any less a culture-specific ideology.

When rights and responsibilities in public are our measure of the units of human social life, we quickly see that “humanism” (Lanier is not using the term in its Italian Renaissance sense) is not necessarily equal to individualism, at least not if we take the full diversity of humanity to be our reference point. The influential nineteenth-century work of the legal historian Henry Sumner Maine charted the historical evolution of our focus on the individual as the unit of accountability. As Maine wrote in his *Ancient Law* (1861), “the unit of an ancient society was the Family, of a modern society the Individual”, and he extended the notion of “family” to include all manner of functionally equivalent corporations. (By “ancient” – or “primitive” – Maine merely meant a society whose legal system is not descended from that of the Romans.) Today’s Western focus on the individual as the rightful locus of accountability turns out

to be a cultural invention. There are other cultural traditions that focus on the collective, and there is no principled way to rank the virtues of these alternatives. This doesn’t detract from Lanier’s point that we mustn’t let people’s work be separated from the associated rights and responsibilities. But is there a privileged type of unit to which these rights and responsibilities must attach? Is “the person” the primary unit we should be guarding?

Consider the status of the individual person in societies of the kind that Maine called “primitive”, that is, the kinds of societies that have been historically more common environments – or might we even say more normal environments – for humans throughout the world. Take Aboriginal Australia, where in many groups the punishment for a crime that one man commits may be rightfully meted upon a different man entirely, someone who played no part in the offending deed but who is “equivalent to” the culprit in some relevant sense, usually through kinship. A man has little control over his brother’s transgressions, but he may nevertheless find himself accountable for those transgressions, for instance by taking a spear through the thigh on the brother’s behalf. An exotic form of justice? Not really. Call it taking a hit for the team.

This kind of distributed accountability is found all over the world, forming the basis, for example, of the family feud: the original culprits and victims may be dead and gone, but their accountability and rights to revenge, just like their wealth and property, are inherited by their descendants. Note that while we may balk at the idea that guilt should be acquired by the innocent, we would less readily forgo our inherited rights to exact revenge on our ancestors’ behalf, or the similarly unearned inheritance of land or material wealth.

The ethnographic record suggests that corporate personhood is not unusual for humankind. Anthropologists have long known of the differentness of cultural perspectives on what it might mean to be human, and there is no shortage of perspectives in which the individual is not all that important. This is no surprise from a biological standpoint. Because individuals die and depart, when you invest in individuals you are also investing in social corporations like families, which – much like genomes – survive beyond the bodies that are their temporary vehicles. Like the story of the selfish gene, a claim that the individual person is not the primary social unit may offend some sensibilities, but that wouldn’t make it less true.

If we fail to uniquely link individuals to their behaviour, as apparently becomes easier with the Web, then not only may credit and accountability dissipate, so may individual authorship. For Lanier, anonymity is death. He decries what he sees as the anonymizing forces of the Web – Wikipedia most notably – but are they a problem of digital culture itself? As with corporate identity in legal systems, there is good reason to think that authorial anonymity in the creative arts, and in the rest of culture, is not unusual across the breadth of human societies. Every culture has oral literature, with a range of related traditions proliferating across different areas of the globe. Anansi stories – tales of “the cunning spider” – are found throughout sub-Saharan West Africa, with variations from place to place yet on essentially the same themes. These stories are faithfully learned and retold by many individuals, who serve as cultural photocopy machines. There must have been innovators who created the first versions, and who tweaked these originals, making new variations along the way. But we can’t know who these creative souls were. A deep anonymity is widespread if not inherent in cultural systems, not just in literary traditions but also in technological complexes, religious belief systems, and languages.

Every one of their little bits was created by a real individual, either by accident through copying errors of memory or performance, or occasionally even in pure drops of creativity. But the whole thing persists only thanks to an ocean of sheer imitation.

Lanier wants it to be otherwise. In the realm of music, he laments what he sees as the death of creativity, especially apparent in the mashup culture of YouTube. “The process of the reinvention of life through music appears to have stopped.” But is music really about reinventing life? Arguably, it’s always been more about re-hashing it. In various online recordings, Lanier can be seen playing a *khaen*, the traditional “mouth organ” of the Lao-speaking culture of Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia. Far from being an instrument for reinventing life, the *khaen* is among the most conservative elements in Lao culture (and not just in a colonially commoditized form). Globally, similarly “traditional” and culturally emblematic instruments would seem to be typical in their conservatism. *Khaen* musicians are professionals who play a very restricted repertoire of music in very restricted circumstances. There is no significant sense in which a typical *khaen* player in Laos would characterize his music (it is always a man) as “an expression of my life”. More like a living jukebox, the performer’s

individual identity seldom takes first place.

It is this characteristic anonymity in cultural systems that Lanier wants to eradicate from Web culture in particular:

Instead of people being treated as sources of their own creativity, commercial aggregation and abstraction sites presented anonymized fragments of creativity as products that might have fallen from the sky or been dug up from the ground, obscuring the true sources.

He is talking about the Web but he could be describing any broadly conventional cultural tradition of music, literature or art in the history of mankind. Lanier wants us to resist the “collective brain”, but no matter how compelling his arguments might be – and they can be compelling – he will have a hard time convincing members of a species that appear to be naturally inclined to put their fate in the hands of the cultural commons.

Our acquiescence to a collective brain is not unique to the Web or anything remotely as modern. Evolutionary psychologists have suggested that we humans are fundamentally predisposed to trust in the collective set of conceptual tools that inheres in any cultural system. The economist and cognitive scientist Herbert Simon called it *docility* (“in its dictionary meaning of ‘disposed to be taught’”), arguing that it is a highly adaptive mechanism, intimately related to our evolved instincts for altruism. In evolutionary terms, Simon argued, individuals have on the whole been far better off simply accepting the beliefs and imitating the behaviours of their elders and peers rather than trying to work everything out anew:

Belief in large numbers of facts and propositions that we have not had the opportunity or ability to evaluate independently is basic to the human condition, a simple corollary of the boundedness of human rationality in the face of a complex world. We avoid most hot stoves without ever having touched them. Most of our skills and knowledge, we learned from others (or from books); we did not discover or invent them. The contribution of docility to fitness is enormous.

A common acceptance of what is collectively shared – for example, a type of agricultural cycle, the local rules and norms of marriage and kinship, the words and grammar of a language – is indispensable if a community-level system is going to work at all. In this sense the Web is just like language or any other cultural edifice, and yet I wonder if Lanier would use his reasoning to argue for a

change in language or culture more generally. For what is a human language or culture if not an aggregation of anonymized fragments of individual creation?

Among the further digital threats to our individual creativity, Lanier identifies a kind of bug in the infrastructure, a corner into which we seem to paint ourselves. His example of the phenomenon comes from computer engineering:

The brittle character of maturing computer programs can cause digital designs to get frozen into place by a process known as lock-in. This happens when many software programs are designed to work with an existing one. The process of significantly changing software in a situation in which a lot of other software is dependent on it is the hardest thing to do. So it almost never happens.

We become “slaves to legacy”. Again, Lanier is talking about the internet, but he could be describing evolved organic structures like bodies and brains, or evolved cultural structures like languages or kinship systems. (Though how exactly lock-in works in cultural and linguistic systems remains a fascinating open question.) “Every element in the system – every computer, every person, every bit – comes to depend on relentlessly detailed adherence to a common standard, a common point of exchange.” If Lanier were talking about human language here, he would come close to describing the set of conventions that allows people just to hold a conversation. To be sure, natural language has more wiggle-room than programming code does. Language is better able to absorb noise and exploration yet still function, while code simply crashes. This wiggle-room is what enables the slow and seldom perceptible processes of historical change in language. But while our natural languages usually lack the top-down engineering of code, they are still highly conservative, and only marginally tolerant of departures from standard protocols. I think Lanier would be right to imply that we are locked in by language, or at least somewhat corralled by it – an idea that has been richly explored for decades by anthropologists and psychologists of language. Just like Lanier’s maturing programs, many biological and cultural systems can’t be quickly or readily re-designed. But we learn to live with constraints and work-arounds.

If the digital world is an evolved system, just like other aspects of culture, then lock-in might be a fact of life. Lanier’s important

point is that with digital culture we have a choice. We now have opportunities to determine just how locked in the system must be (though time is running out to make the changes, he urges). Will it have a heavily locked-in body plan like that of a mammal, or might it be able to maintain the much more adaptive kind of mix-and-match arrangement that microbes enjoy? Lanier pleads for something like the latter, and backs up his plea with some concrete proposals.

Lanier sometimes wears a scientist hat but he is often not wearing it in this book, certainly not where he firmly distinguishes humans from nature (referring for example to our “sad animal ancestry”). He warns against “treating people as nothing other than parts of nature”, yet this is what any biologist must do. He warns against “treating nature like a person”, yet to do so is a virtual instinct for humans, one that underlies the near universality of cultural belief in supernatural entities. This can only mean that Lanier’s manifesto is one that strives not to put human nature back on course, but to change human nature for good.

I wish I could see the world as he sees it. But the Web is like any technological or cultural system in being consciously designed only in part. It was also in part discovered, as a realm of possibility. Now out of the box, it is out of any individual’s hands. As the meme mavens would have it (and indeed as Lanier warns), these big systems may now just be using us little people to replicate themselves. The fine print makes it clear that Lanier is committed to a middle ground which acknowledges the value of digital collectivism if managed properly. The point of his individualist bluster is to remind us to think through the possible human costs of some highly consequential technological design decisions. Few would disagree with the sentiment.

The reason Lanier is so disappointed is that he was one of the innovators, and “innovator” is his personality type. But a society can only carry so many of those. The dynamics of cultural change through the diffusion of innovations requires a population in which a handful of innovators is complemented by an army of adopters, and a few laggards at the end for good measure. What Lanier wants is for us all to stand out from the crowd. “The whole point of connected media technologies was that we were supposed to come up with new, amazing cultural expression.” Perhaps that was the point. But meanwhile, connected media technologies have come to do what cultural systems do so well, and so often: provide people with learning opportunities for more effective survival, while not burdening us with too many choices.

What Lanier offers is an idealist’s blueprint for creative individualism in an age of digital doom. But if human beings are naturally predisposed to copy, re-hash, and only occasionally tinker with the traditions of their senior associates, then it will be a tough sell to get us all on board with the manifesto. For those who already think that individualism is paramount to humanism, Lanier will reassure you. But if you are convinced by arguments that informational collectivism results in greater benefits for all, as many pundits now propose, then Lanier’s minimal engagement with those arguments may leave you wanting. It will take more to turn this manifesto into an argument.

Drench

You sleep with a dream of summer weather, wake to the thrum of rain – roped down by rain. Nothing out there but drop-heavy feathers of grass and rainy air. The plastic table on the terrace has shed three legs on its way to the garden fence. The mountains have had the sense to disappear. It’s the Celtic temperament – wind, then torrens, then remorse. Glory rising like a curtain over distant water. Old stonehouse, having steered us through the dark, docks in a pool of shadow all its own. That widening crack in the gloom is like good luck. Luck, which neither you nor tomorrow can depend on.

ANNE STEVENSON