

The Information Super-Sewer: Will the Internet be Hijacked by Corporate Interests

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Theme: [History](#)

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The Internet has become one more tool hijacked by corporate interests to accelerate our cultural, political and economic decline. The great promise of the Internet, to open up dialogue, break down cultural barriers, promote democracy and unleash innovation and creativity, has been exposed as a scam. The Internet is dividing us into antagonistic clans, in which we chant the same slogans and hate the same enemies, while our creative work is handed for free to Web providers who use it as bait for advertising.

Ask journalists, photographers, musicians, cartoonists or artists what they think of the Web. Ask movie and film producers. Ask architects or engineers. The Web efficiently disseminates content, but it does not protect intellectual property rights. Writers and artists are increasingly unable to make a living. And technical professions are under heavy assault. Anything that can be digitized can and is being outsourced to countries such as India and China where wages are miserable and benefits nonexistent. Welcome to the new global serfdom where the only professions that pay a living wage are propaganda and corporate management.

The Web, at the same time it is destroying creative work, is forming anonymous crowds that vent collective rage, intolerance and bigotry. These virtual slums do not expand communication or dialogue. They do not enrich our culture. They create a herd mentality in which those who express empathy for “the enemy”—and the liberal class is as guilty of this as the right wing—are denounced by their fellow travelers for their impurity. Racism toward Muslims may be as evil as anti-Semitism, but try to express this simple truth on a partisan Palestinian or Israeli website.

Jaron Lanier, the “father of virtual reality technology,” in his new book “You Are Not a Gadget,” warns us of this frightening new collectivism. He notes that the habits imposed by the Internet have reconfigured how we relate to each other. He writes that “Web 2.0,” “Open Culture,” “Free Software” and the “Long Tail” have become enablers of this new collectivism. He cites Wikipedia, which consciously erases individual voices, and Google Wave as examples of the rise of mass collective thought and mass emotions. Google Wave is a new communication platform that permits users to edit what someone else has said in a conversation when it is displayed as well as allow collaborators to watch each other as they type. Privacy, honesty and self-reflection are instantly obliterated.

Tastes and information on the Internet are determined by the crowd, what Lanier calls the hive mentality. Music, books, journalism, commercials and bits of television shows and movies, along with inane YouTube videos, are thrust onto our screens and into national consciousness because of the statistical analysis of Internet crowd preferences. Lanier says

that one of the biggest mistakes he and other computer scientists made when the Internet was developed was allowing contributions to the Internet to go unpaid. He says decisions such as this have now robbed people, especially those who create, of their ability to make a living and ultimately the capacity for dignity. Digital collectivism, he warns, is destroying the dwindling vestiges of authentic creativity and innovation, including journalism, which takes time, investment and self-reflection. And while there are a few sites that do pay for content—Truthdig being one—the vast majority are parasites. The only income left for most of those who create is earned through self-promotion, but as Lanier points out this turns culture into nothing but advertising. It fosters a social ethic in which the capacity for crowd manipulation is more highly valued than truth, beauty or thought.

While the severing of intellectual property rights from their creators, whether journalists, photographers or musicians, means that those who create lose the capacity to make a living from their work, aggregators such as Google make money by collecting and distributing this work to lure advertisers. Original work on the Internet, as Lanier points out, is “copied, mashed up, anonymized, analyzed, and turned into bricks in someone else’s fortress to support an advertising scheme.” Lanier warns that if this trend is not halted it will create a “formula that leaves no way for our nation to earn a living in the long term.”

“Funding a civilization through advertising is like trying to get nutrition by connecting a tube from one’s anus to one’s mouth,” Lanier says. “The body starts consuming itself. That is what we are doing online. As more and more human activity is aggregated, people huddle around the last remaining oases of revenue. Musicians today might still be able to get paid to make music for video games, for instance, because games are still played in closed consoles and haven’t been collectivized as yet.”

I called Lanier in San Francisco. He began by saying that he was not against the Internet, but against how it has evolved. He has sounded his warning, he said, because he fears that if we fall into an economic tailspin, the Internet, like other innovative systems of mass communication in human history, could be used to exacerbate social enmity and lead to an American totalitarianism.

“The scenario I can see is America in some economic decline, which we seem determined to enter into because we are unable to make any adjustments, and a lot of unhappy people,” Lanier said. “The preponderance of them are in rural areas and in the red states, the former slave states. And they are all connected and get angrier and angrier. What exactly happens? Do they start converging on abortion clinics? Probably. Do they start converging on legislatures and take them over? I don’t know, maybe. I shouldn’t speak it. It is almost a curse to imagine these things. But any intelligent person can see the scenario I am afraid to see. There is a potential here for very bad stuff to happen.”

And yet the utopian promoters of the Internet tell us that the hive mind, the vast virtual collective, will propel us toward a brave new world. Lanier dismisses such visions as childish fantasy, one that allows many well-intentioned people to be seduced by an evolving nightmare.

“The crowd phenomenon exists, but the hive does not exist,” Lanier told me. “All there is, is a crowd phenomenon, which can often be dangerous. To a true believer, which I certainly am not, the hive is like the baby at the end of ‘2001 Space Odyssey.’ It is a super creature that surpasses humanity. To me it is the misinterpretation of the old crowd phenomenon

with a digital vibe. It has all the same dangers. A crowd can turn into a mean mob all too easily, as it has throughout human history.”

“There are some things crowds can do, such as count the jelly beans in the jar or guess the weight of the ox,” Lanier added. “I acknowledge this phenomenon is real. But I propose that the line between when crowds can think effectively as a crowd and when they can’t is a little different. If you read [James] Surowiecki’s “The Wisdom of Crowds,” he, as well as other theorists, say that if you want a crowd to be wise the key is to reduce the communication flow between the members so they do not influence each other, so they are truly independent and have separate sample points. It brings up an interesting paradox. The starting point for online crowd enthusiasts is that connection is good and everyone should be connected. But when they talk about what makes a crowd smart they say people should not be talking to each other. They should be isolated. There is a contradiction there. What makes a crowd smart is the type of question you ask. If you ask a group of informed people to choose a single numeric value such as the weight of an ox and they all have some reason to have a theory that is not entirely crazy they will center on the answer. You can get something useful. This phenomenon is what accounts for price fitting in capitalism. This is how markets can function. If you ask them to create anything, if you ask them to do something constructive or synthetic or engage in compound reasoning then they will fail. Then you get something dull or an averaging out. One danger of the crowd is violence, which is when they turn into a mob. The other is dullness or mundaneness, when you design by committee.”

Humans, like many other species, Lanier says, have a cognitive switch that permits us to be individuals or members of a mob. Once we enter the confines of what Lanier calls a clan, even a virtual clan, it possesses dynamics that appeal to the basest instincts within us. Technology evolves but human nature remains constant. The 20th century was the bloodiest in human history because human beings married the newly minted tools of efficient state bureaucracies and industrial slaughter with the dark impulses that have existed since the dawn of the human species.

“You become hypersensitive to the pecking order and to your sense of social status,” Lanier said of these virtual clans. “There is almost always the designated loser in your own group and the designated external enemy. There is the enemy below and the enemy afar. There become two classes of disenfranchised people. You enter into a constant obligation to defend your status which is always being contested. It is time-consuming to become a member of one of these things. I see a lot of designs on line that bring this out. There is a recognizable sequence, whether it is pianos, poodles or jihad; you see people forming into these clans. It is playing with fire. There are plenty of examples of evil in human history that did not involve this effect, such as Jack the Ripper, who worked alone. But most of the really bad examples of human behavior in history involve invoking this clan dynamic. No particular sort of person is immune to it. Geeks are no more immune to it than Germans or Russians or Japanese or Mongolians. It is part of our nature. It can be woken up without any leadership structure or politics. It happens. It is part of us. There is a switch inside of us waiting to be turned. And people can learn to manipulate the switch in others.”

“The Machine Stops,” a story published by E.M. Forster in 1909, paints a futuristic world where people are mesmerized by virtual reality. In Forster’s dystopia, human beings live in isolated, tiny subterranean rooms, like hives, where they are captivated by instant messages and cinematophoes—machines that project visual images. They cut themselves off from the external world and are absorbed by a bizarre pseudo-reality of voices, sounds,

evanescent images and abstract sensations that can be evoked by pressing a few buttons. The access to the world of the Machine, which has replaced the real world with a virtual world, is provided by an omniscient impersonal voice.

We are, as Forster understood, seduced and then often enslaved by technology, from the combustion engine to computers to robotics. These marvels of humankind's ingenuity are inevitably hijacked by modern slave masters who use the newest technologies to keep us impoverished, confused about our identity and passive. The Internet, designed by defense strategists to communicate after a nuclear attack, has become the latest technological instrument in the hands of those who are driving us into a state of neofeudalism. Technology is morally neutral. It serves the interests of those who control it. And those who control it today are ravishing journalism, culture and art while they herd the population into clans that fuel intolerance and hatred.

"A common rationalization in the fledgling world of digital cultures back then was that we were entering a transitional lull before a creative storm—or were already in the eye of the storm," Lanier writes in his book. "But we were not passing through a momentary calm. We had, rather, entered a persistent somnolence, and I have come to believe that we will escape it only when we kill the hive."

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