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SMALL PARENT INVESTMENT

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World Wide Mush

In his new book, "You Are Not A Gadget," online pioneer Jaron Lanier explains how the Internet has gone off course; a chorus of voices makes everything flat—and scary

By [JARON LANIER](#)



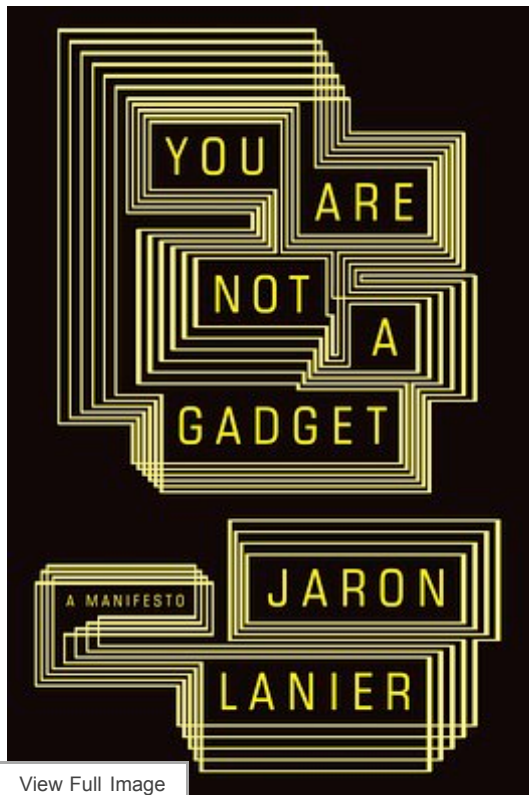
William Brown

All too many of today's Internet buzzwords— including "Web 2.0," "Open Culture," "Free Software" and the "Long Tail"—are terms for a new kind of collectivism that has come to dominate the way many people participate in the online world. The idea of a world where everybody has a say and nobody goes unheard is deeply appealing. But what if all of the voices that are piling on end up drowning one another out?

There's no escaping collectivism in our online world. If you search about most any topic online, for instance, you will likely be directed first to Wikipedia, a collective effort. Google Wave, a new communication tool that is intended to supplant email, encourages you to blur personal boundaries by editing what someone else has said in a conversation with you, and you can watch each other as you type so nobody gets a private moment to consider a thought before posting. And if you listen to music online, there's a good chance your listening will be guided by statistical analysis of Internet crowd preferences.

Most people know me as the "father of Virtual Reality technology." In the 1980s and 1990s, I was a young computer scientist and entrepreneur working on how to apply virtual reality to things like surgical simulation. But I was also part of a circle of friends who tried to imagine how computers would fit into the peoples' lives, including how people might make a living in the future. Our dream came true, in part. It turns out that millions of people are ready to contribute instead of sitting passively on the couch watching television. On the other hand, we made a huge mistake in making those contributions unpaid, and often anonymous, because those bad decisions robbed people of dignity. I am appalled that our old fantasies have become so entrenched that it's hard to get anyone to remember that there are alternatives to a framework that isn't working.

Here's one problem with digital collectivism: We shouldn't want the whole world to take on the quality of having been designed by a committee. When you have everyone collaborate on everything, you generate a dull, average outcome in all things. You don't get innovation.



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If you want to foster creativity and excellence, you have to introduce some boundaries. Teams need some privacy from one another to develop unique approaches to any kind of competition. Scientists need some time in private before publication to get their results in order. Making everything open all the time creates what I call a global mush.

There's a dominant dogma in the online culture of the moment that collectives make the best stuff, but it hasn't proven to be true. The most sophisticated, influential and lucrative examples of computer code—like the page-rank algorithms in the top search engines or Adobe's Flash—always turn out to be the results of proprietary development. Indeed, the adored iPhone came out of what many regard as the most closed, tyrannically managed software-development shop on Earth.

Actually, Silicon Valley is remarkably good at not making collectivization mistakes when our own fortunes are at stake. If you suggested that, say, Google, Apple and Microsoft should be merged so that all their

engineers would be aggregated into a giant wiki-like project—well you'd be laughed out of Silicon Valley so fast you wouldn't have time to tweet about it. Same would happen if you suggested to one of the big venture-capital firms that all the start-ups they are funding should be merged into a single collective operation.

But this is exactly the kind of mistake that's happening with some of the most influential projects in our culture, and ultimately in our economy.

Digital collectivism might seem participatory and democratic, but it's painting us into a corner from which we will have to concoct an awkward escape. It is strange to me that this isn't more obvious to many of my Silicon Valley colleagues.

The U.S. made a fateful decision in the late 20th century to routinely cede manufacturing and other physical-world labors to foreign competitors so that we could focus more on lucrative, comfortable intellectual activities like design, entertainment and the creation of other types of intellectual property. That formulation still works for certain products that remain within a system of proprietary control, like Apple's iPhone.

Unfortunately, we were also making another decision at the same time: that the very idea of intellectual property impedes information flow and sharing. Over the last decade, many of us cheered as a lot of software, music and news became free, but we were shooting ourselves in the collective feet.

On the one hand we want to avoid physical work and instead benefit from intellectual property. On the other hand, we're undermining intellectual property so that information can roam around for nothing, or more precisely as bait for advertisements. That's a formula that leaves no way for our nation to earn a living in the long term.

The "open" paradigm rests on the assumption that the way to get ahead is to give away your brain's work—your music, writing, computer code and so on—and earn kudos instead of money. You are then supposedly compensated because your occasional dollop of online recognition will help you get some kind of less cerebral work that can earn money. For instance, maybe you can sell custom branded T-shirts.

We're well over a decade into this utopia of demonetized sharing and almost everyone who does the kind of work that has been collectivized online is getting poorer. There are only a tiny handful of writers or musicians who actually make a living in the new utopia, for instance. Almost everyone else is becoming more like a peasant every day.

And it's going to get worse. Before too long—in 10 years, I'd guess—cheap home robots will be able to make custom T-shirts from free designs off the Internet. When that day comes, then a T-shirt's design will be no more valuable than recorded music is today.

The T-shirt-making robot is only one example of a general principle. As technology gets better and better, more and more jobs will essentially become threatened, just like today's jobs for reporters or recording musicians.

One of the bright spots in the employment picture for the U.S. is in health-care jobs, such as those related to elder care. But the Japanese are developing health-care robots to anticipate the needs of their aging population. When those robots get good and cheap, which they probably will within a couple of decades, a lot of health-care jobs in the U.S. will either go away or become much less well-paid.

This isn't how things should be. Improving technology is supposed to create ever more comfortable and cerebral jobs for people. Some kind of intellectual-property system is the only way Americans, or people anywhere, can earn money in the long, long term, as technology gets very good.

The owners of big computer resources on the Internet, like Google, will be able to make money from the open approach for a long time, of course, by routing advertisements, but middle-class people will be increasingly asked to accept a diet of mere kudos. No one should feel insulated from this trend. Poverty has a way of trickling up. Once everyone is aggregated, what will be left to be advertised?

All too often, a youthful perspective falls prey to the fallacy of collectivism. I fell prey to it myself. In my early 20s, I lived in collective households and belonged to food co-ops, as did most of my friends. I

recall these things now as harmless diversions, more of a way of extending the experience of childhood than an attempt at revolution.

Youthful fascination with collectivism is in part simply a way to address perceived "unfairness." If everyone shares, then a young person arriving on the scene fresh will not have less than an older person who has been around for a while.

This is all harmless enough, but the pattern can be manipulated in dangerous ways. I don't want our young people aggregated, even by a benevolent social-networking site. I want them to develop as fierce individuals, and to earn their living doing exactly that. When they work together, I hope they'll do so in competitive, genuinely distinct teams so that they can get honest feedback and create big-time innovations that earn royalties, instead of spending all their time on crowd-pleasing gambits to seek kudos. This is not just so that they and their children will thrive, but so that they won't become a mob, which, as history has shown us again and again, is a vulnerability of human nature.

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. This essay is adapted from his book "You Are Not a Gadget," due out next week from Knopf.

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