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# Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now by Jaron Lanier – review

Lanier was there for the creation of the internet and is convinced that social media is toxic, making us sadder, angrier and more isolated

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**M**any of the ideas in Jaron Lanier's new book start off pretty familiar – at least, if you are active on social media. Yet in every chapter there is a principle so elegant, so neat, sometimes even so beautiful, that what is billed as straight polemic becomes something much more profound.

The concept of random reinforcement, for example: addiction fed not by reward but by never knowing whether or when the reward will come, is well known. But Lanier puts it like this: "The algorithm is trying to capture the perfect parameters for manipulating a brain, while the brain, in order to seek out deeper meaning, is changing in response to the algorithm's experiments ... Because the stimuli from the algorithm doesn't mean anything, because they genuinely are random, the brain isn't responding to anything real, but to a fiction. That process – of becoming hooked on an elusive mirage – *is* addiction."

The restless scrolling, the clammy self-reproach afterwards … we could recognise that as addiction quite easily, but the mathematical mechanism for having created it makes horrible sense (Lanier isn't that interested in culprits, though he finds all of Silicon Valley pretty callow).

He wears his tech credentials lightly, as he can afford to, having been there for the creation of the internet; he was chief scientist of the engineering office of Internet2 and there in the very first chat-rooms, whence he draws the conclusion that I found the least convincing: even at its incipience, online communication tended towards the hostile. "Sometimes, out of nowhere, I would get into a fight with someone … It was so weird. We'd start insulting each other, trying to score points." Since this all predated algorithmic manipulation, and cannot be blamed on Facebook, he concludes that we have pack behaviours and solitary behaviours: in a pack, we become locked in internecine competition; on our own "we're more free. We're cautious, but also more capable of joy."

This flattens out some vital distinctions: there's a difference between getting together to talk to strangers about why your celibacy is a woman's fault, and mustering online to start the Arab spring. Silicon Valley has a distinctive way of looking at things: have big idea; iterate; fix; iterate again. It works well in software design, but it's possible that to apply to very complex systems (like human beings), the big idea has to be refined a little more before it's tested.



Jaron Lanier, photographed in 1990. Photograph: Rex Features

Lanier explicitly addresses this in chapter eight, Social Media Doesn't Want You to Have Economic Dignity, as he describes how our modern reality was seeded by that mindset, those peculiar yes/no certainties of the web's earliest creators. The internet was built with no way to make or get payments, no way to find other people you might like. "Everyone knew these functions … would be needed. We figured it would be wiser to let entrepreneurs fill in the blanks than to leave that task to government … We foolishly laid the foundations for global monopolies."

Given the network effect – that Uber only works if everyone is on it – a thousand flowers were never going to bloom. There's only room for one and it's a Venus fly trap. The same libertarian spirit also instituted the peculiar economics of the internet: software had to be free, because only that way would it be open ("everyone knew that software would eventually become more important than law, so the prospect of a world running on hidden code was dark and creepy"). Yet that meant programmers wouldn't be paid: they would create free code and make money by solving problems later.

And so the gig economy was born, this highly skilled field spreading its insecurity to low-skilled ones, food delivery, retail. Neo-Marxians would have something to say about capital in all this but

Lanier emphatically doesn't claim to have all the answers. "Please take what you can use from me. I know I don't know everything," he says in a winsome footnote.

His most dispiriting observations are those about what social media does to politics - biased, "not towards the left or right, but downwards". If triggering emotions is the highest prize, and negative emotions are easier to trigger, how could social media not make you sad? If your consumption of content is tailored by near limitless observations harvested about people like you, how could your universe not collapse into the partial depiction of reality that people like you also enjoy? How could empathy and respect for difference thrive in this environment? Where's the incentive to stamp out fake accounts, fake news, paid troll armies, dyspeptic bots?

I finished this stark but exuberant account not fearing for the future so much as amazed the world wasn't already even worse.

• *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now* is published by Bodley Head. To order a copy for £8.49 (RRP £9.99) go to guardianbookshop.com or call 0330 333 6846. Free UK p&p over £10, online orders only. Phone orders min p&p of £1.99.

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