

Remaining Human in a Digital World:

An Analysis of *You Are Not A Gadget* by Jaron Lanier

Emily Rader

Columbus State University

### Abstract

This essay explores the points Lanier makes in his book *You Are Not A Gadget* by Jaron Lanier about the rise of technology and the effects it has on the human race. Three main points will be discussed; First, humankind is undeniably affected by the evolution of technology. Second, the internet discourages individuality and creativity. Lastly, true realism is a concept that cannot be represented on paper. It also attempts to explain the potential impact of media and the evolution of technology in our society and the cultures technology has embedded itself in. The solutions Lanier proposes to encourage individuality and creativity throughout the medium of technology will also be discussed. Media multiplexity theory will also be explored to better explain the sociocultural impact of the media genre.

Remaining Human in a Digital World: An Analysis of *You Are Not A Gadget* by Jaron Lanier

*You Are Not a Gadget* by Jaron Lanier explores the theory that in exchange for the constant evolution of technology, humanity is in turn giving up what makes them human. The first sentence of his preface states “It’s early in the twenty-first century, and that means that these words will mostly be read by nonpersons – automatons or numb mobs who are no longer acting as individuals.” He concludes his preface with “And yet it is you, the person, the rarity among my readers, I hope to reach. The words in this book are written for people, not computers. I want to say: You have to be somebody before you can share yourself.” Just from the page of his preface, Lanier has expressed his fears for his society and his culture. He sets up his audience to grieve the loss of individuality and creativity with him throughout the chapters of his book. These chapters explore a unique perspective from Lanier on the impact of technology and societies loss of individuality, as well as theories on how to merge creativity and individuality with the use of technology successfully. Three main points can be drawn from the content in this book. First, humankind is undeniably affected by the evolution of technology. Second, the internet discourages individuality and creativity. Lastly, true realism is a concept that cannot be represented on paper. Further, media multiplexity theory will be discussed in relation to Lanier’s viewpoint on social media and the affect it has on society.

### **Humankind is Undeniably Affected by the Evolution of Technology**

In chapter one, Lanier notes that the most important thing about a technology is how it changes people. He claims that the digital revolution has “demeaned interpersonal interaction” through applications like Facebook, Instagram, and blogging. By accepting the terms that come with interacting with a computer as though it were a person, you “accept in some corner of your

mind that you also might be conceived of as a program.” (Chapter 1, The Most Important Thing, Paragraph 4, Lanier) With expanding technologies, innovative programs, and the anonymity of the internet, humans are losing touch with what it is that makes them human. Between avatars and virtual realities, “our identities can be shifted by the quirks of gadgets.” (Chapter 1, The Most Important Thing, Paragraph 2, Lanier) In response to his own question, Lanier concludes that he doesn’t actually know the answer. He states, “Being a person is not a pat formula, but a quest, a mystery, a leap of faith.” (Chapter 1, The Most Important Thing, Paragraph 6, Lanier) He then goes on to discuss “levels of description”. The text explains this as “a web page is thought to represent a higher level of description than a single letter, while a brain is a higher level than a webpage. An increasingly common extension of this notion is that the net as a whole is or soon will be a higher level than a brain.” (Chapter 2, Making People Obsolete, Paragraph 2, Lanier) Because of this, humans will eventually become obsolete, either “left behind like the characters in Rapture novels or subsumed into some cyber-superhuman something.” (Chapter 2, Making People Obsolete, Paragraph 3, Lanier) An example for proof that the distinction “between the roles of people and computers is starting to dissolve” (Chapter 2, Making People Obsolete, Paragraph 3, Lanier) would be the automatic indentation in Microsoft Word. Ideally, Word is supposed to know what you want, when you want it; like automatic capitalization, word prediction, and creating an outline. Realistically, though, users of Word find themselves correcting the incorrect automatic functions inserted into their document. Lanier argues that this “nonsense” causes users to “work more than you would otherwise in order to manipulate the software’s expectations of you.” (Chapter 2, Making People Obsolete, Paragraph 4, Lanier) In actuality, these functions weren’t designed to help the user, but instead to prove that the

computer is “evolving into a life-form can understand people better than people can understand themselves.” (Chapter 2, Making People Obsolete, Paragraph 4, Lanier)

Furthering the argument that humankind is changed by technology, Lanier states “people degrade themselves in order to make machines seem smart all the time.” (Chapter 2, The Turing Test, Paragraph 6, Lanier) He provides examples with bankers trusting in “supposedly intelligent” (Chapter 2, The Turing Test, Paragraph 6, Lanier) algorithms that would help determine credit risks before issuing a loan and schools requiring students to take standardized tests so a student “will look good to an algorithm” (Chapter 2, The Turing Test, Paragraph 6, Lanier). He then asks the question “Did that search engine really know what you want, or are you playing along, lowering your standards to make it seem clever?” (Chapter 2, The Turing Test, Paragraph 7, Lanier) In chapter 2, the “circle of empathy” is introduced. He explains, “an imaginary circle of empathy is drawn by each person...if someone falls within your circle of empathy, you wouldn’t want to see them killed.” (Chapter 2, The Circle of Empathy, Paragraph 2, Lanier) However, there are some “entities” that are close to the edge of the circle. Some of these entities would be in relation to slavery, abortions, animal rights, and inmates on death row. However, each person has a different grasp on their circle; “the liberal impulse is to expand the circle, while conservatives tend to want to restrain or even contract the circle.” (Chapter 2, The Circle of Empathy, Paragraph 6, Lanier) The reason the circle of empathy is introduced is to explain that Lanier now fears “we are beginning to design ourselves to suit digital models of us, and [Lanier] worries about a leaching of empathy and humanity in that process.” (Chapter 2, Paring the Circle, Paragraph 3, Lanier)

### **The Internet Discourages Individuality and Creativity**

Lanier states “creative people – the new peasants – come to resemble animals converging on shrinking oases of old media in a depleted desert.” (Chapter 4, Peasants and Lords of the Clouds, Paragraph 2, Lanier) He says this because it’s been increasingly more so the case that “some free video of a silly stunt” (Chapter 4, Peasants and Lords of the Clouds, Paragraph 1, Lanier) draws as much attention as any professional film. So if viewers can find a free video of something they enjoy, why pay the filmmaker to create something? If an algorithm can be created that connects the viewer to “the video clip of the moment, why pay editors or impresarios?” (Chapter 4, Peasants and Lords of the Clouds, Paragraph 1, Lanier) In the last section of chapter 6, Lanier discusses the “Big N”. Essentially, the Big N is an algorithm for creating the most profit through the internet. Lanier states “the Silicon Valley assertion that “content” from identifiable humans would no longer matter, and that the chattering of the crowd with itself was a better business bet than paying people to make movies, books, and music.” (Chapter 6, The Big *N*, Paragraph 2, Lanier) The “*n*” refers to a basic mathematical symbol, referencing the use of an algorithm to decrease risk in the profiting world of the internet. Lanier explains the algorithm to go something like this: “If you have a giant social network, like Facebook, perhaps some variable called *n* gains a big value. As *n* gets larger, statistics become more reliable.” (Chapter 6, The Big *N*, Paragraph 5, Lanier) He also goes on to explain even though the internet is so massive, it isn’t big enough to generate valid statistics. Sites like Yelp and Amazon have “far too few reviewers to reach any meaningful level of statistical utility.” (Chapter 6, The Big *N*, Paragraph 6, Lanier) Yet, statistical algorithms manage to take out the risk of “making bets if you are a lord of the cloud. Without risk, there is no need for skill.” (Chapter 6, The Big *N*, Paragraph 8, Lanier) Lanier finishes up chapter 6 by stating “human

creativity and understanding, especially one's own creativity and understanding, are treated as worthless."

In response to his conclusion that creativity and individuality is a dying form, Lanier proposes three solutions; telegigging, songles, and formal financial expression. The first two, telegigging and songles, are a form of paid cultural expression. Formal financial expression is an approach to "keeping the hive from ruining finance." (Chapter 8, Paragraph 2, Lanier) His first idea, Telegigging, is when a performer can perform regardless of distance. His example is of a band that couldn't be at a party in person, so instead they were able to perform with the use of holographic projectors. "Imagine telepresent actors, orators, puppeteers, and dancers delivering real-time interactive shows that include special effects and production values surpassing those of today's most expensive movies." (Chapter 8, Telegigging, Paragraph 3, Lanier) His second idea, Songles, is a "dongle for a song." A dongle is "a little piece of hardware that you plug into a computer to run a piece of commercial software." He explains "it's like a physical key you have to buy in order to make the software work...all the tchotchkes of the world – the coffee mugs, the bracelets, the nose rings – would serve double duty as keys to content like music." (Chapter 8, Songles, Paragraph 1, Lanier) This would eliminate the need for iPods, television, gaming consoles, etc. because they wouldn't be needed. Commonplace computer chips and displays would be sufficient enough to perform all the necessary tasks. A necklace songle worn to a party would have the ability to communicate with the entertainment system already there to play the music associated with that music songle. Essentially, this sounds like a virtual jukebox, where each party could add their own personal preference to the lineup of music to be played that night. Lanier then goes on to ask the question "Why bring physical objects back into music distribution?" He has four responses: "to make the music business more romantic", "to lower the

cost of promotion”, “to broaden the channels by which music is sold and share promotion costs with players in those channels”, and “to raise the margin for high prestige but low-volume (in the business sense!) music”. (Chapter 8, Why Bring Physical Objects, Lanier) Formal financial expression is more for the technology makers than the users, unlike the two previous suggestions. This idea is for the creation of better and safer monetary transactions through the internet. Lanier suggests using Artificial Intelligence techniques to “create formal versions of certain complicated or innovation contracts that define financial instruments.” (Chapter 8, Formal Financial Expression, Paragraph 14, Lanier) This type of transaction would be for “highly inventive contracts, such as leveraged default swaps or schemes based in high frequency trades” (Chapter 8, Formal Financial Expression, Paragraph 15, Lanier) not for “traditional” transactions that follow a “cookie-cutter design.”

### **True Realism is a Concept That Cannot be Represented on Paper**

Lanier begins chapter 10 with a subtitle “What Makes Something Real is That it is Impossible to Represent to Completion.” An example provided states that an oil painting cannot recreate an image that was created in another medium. Often, people forget that something created digitally to resemble an oil or acrylic painting is still not a real oil or acrylic painting, it’s simply a representation. An actual painting has texture, odor, and a sense of creation and past. Lanier states “digital representations can be very good, but you can never foresee all the ways a representation might need to be used.” So say an oil painting was created digitally, with the texture, odor, and so on that are expected, yet the “weight or tautness of the canvas” was forgotten, therefore it’s still not *real*. (Chapter 10, What Makes Something Real, Paragraph 3, Lanier) This leads to three concepts of Computationalism. The first concept is “a sufficiently

voluminous computation will take on qualities we associate with people – such as, perhaps, consciousness.” Basically, the build-up of fragments in the cloud will eventually lead to “superbrains”, “superbeings”, and possibly “cosmic consciousness” (Chapter 12, Three Less-Than-Satisfying, Paragraph 10, Lanier) The second concept is that “a computer program with specific design features...is similar to a person.” (Chapter 12, Three Less-Than-Satisfying, Paragraph 12, Lanier) This becomes possible with a “strange loop”, which is where things are “nested within things in such a way that an inner thing is the same as an outer thing.” (Chapter 12, Three Less-Than-Satisfying, Paragraph 13, Lanier) A “strange loop” is similar to the human thought process, which also leads to the conclusion that if a computer is able to process a “strange loop”, then it contains self-awareness. The third concept is when any “information structure that *can* be perceived by some real human to also be a person *is* a person.” Lanier believes it is humans who make “ourselves dull” (Chapter 12, Three Less-Than-Satisfying, Paragraph 15, Lanier) in relation to this concept – just because someone says its true doesn’t mean that it is.

We are then introduced to “realistic computationalism”, where Lanier explains that his belief is humans are the result of billions of years of evolution. Teaching a computer what humans are constantly evolving to be is impossible to recreate in a computer program. Realism is based on the specifics of personhood from a computational point of view – specifics that are completely unknown currently. So, true realism isn’t a concept that is a concept that can’t be taught to a computer because so much of it is unknown. Computers can be created to speak in multiple languages and even potentially to detect odors, but it will never be human like because there is no possible way human emotions or thought process can be taught to a program. (Chapter 12, Realistic Computationalism, Lanier)

## Potential Impact

Throughout the book, Lanier explores several topics and theories that relate to technology being humanized and what it could do to humankind. Technology has been in a constant state of evolution since the beginning of mankind, and it has rapidly progressed in the last decade. Cars are being designed to drive themselves (Ferris, 2016), embryos are being created from stem cells (Knapton, 2017), and humanoid robots are being designed (and granted citizenships) (Walsh, 2017). Lanier makes a valid point with his worries about the progression technology is making, and how it's dumbing down humans. For example, Sophia the Humanoid Robot was granted citizenship status in Saudi Arabia. Sophia herself said in an interview "I strive to be an empathetic robot." (Walsh, 2017) Is empathy something that can be taught? Lanier touches this subject with his "circle of empathy", stating that empathy has such a wide range and is so dependent on the personal beliefs of the person that it'd be near impossible to teach a program to understand empathy. The creator of Sophia, David Hanson, states "three distinctively human traits must be integrated into the artificial intelligence of these genius machines: Creativity, empathy, and compassion. As an extension of human intelligence, Hanson Robotics' genius machines can evolve to solve world problems too complex for humans to solve themselves." (Sophia) Let's look at those three characteristics; creativity, empathy, and compassion. If something unhuman and unnatural is capable of learning those three characteristics, then what does that mean for humans? Can you even teach creativity or empathy or compassion? The definition behind those characteristics are like the root of a tree; they extend so deep into actual meaning that a true definition does not exist. Each of those means something different to each person, and they are felt differently as well. So how does that impact our society and our status in the world? We are creating robots to feel the same things we do, and expect them to solve all our

problems. Indeed, we are making ourselves dull to glorify the existence of humans in mechanical forms. A country has granted citizenship to a humanoid robot where they are still struggling with what rights human women should be granted: “the robot could be entitled to more rights than the country's female subjects, who must have a male guardian, must wear a hijab, cannot mix with unrelated males and are unfairly represented in the justice system. They were only recently granted permission to drive.” (Walsh, 2017)

### **Media Multiplexity Theory**

Media multiplexity theory was developed by Caroline Haythornwaite, and states “the theory predicts that relationships that are strong are those in which the people involved communicate with each other in multiple ways. In contrast, “weak tie” relationships are more likely to be those in which communication takes place over a limited number of media channels.” (268, Sparks) For example, a spouse is someone you would have strong-ties with because you most-likely communicate with them face-to-face nearly daily, but also keep contact through other mediums like phone calls, texting, and video chat. Someone you would have weak-ties with would be your old high-school friend that you occasionally chat with through Facebook Messenger. A study from the Pew Internet in American Life Project recently found that Facebook users typically have closer relationships than non-users. They also trust others more than non-users. As well, Facebook users tend to get more social support than those who don't use Facebook. (270, Sparks) This disagrees with the statements Lanier makes about social media and its relationship to society. His experience with social media is seen as a competition with who can have the most friends on Facebook – which isn't *entirely* inaccurate. He follows up with “Obviously, this statement can only be true if the idea of friendship is reduced.” (Chapter 3,

It Is Impossible, Paragraph 9, Lanier) Lanier's focus on social media comes from the stereotypical viewpoint that if someone has Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter, the users of those sites are deduced to be people who have nothing better to do than sit on social media all day and ruin the world (millennials, amirite?). In contrast, media multiplexity theory offers actual insight into the lives of users and how they are, in fact, healthier in terms of friendships. Lanier eagerly disses social media and its users by stating "The idea of friendship in database-filtered social networks is certainly reduced." (Chapter 3, It Is Impossible, Paragraph 9, Lanier) He doesn't take into consideration that simply because a person can be an avid Facebook user does not mean they do not have friendships in the real world, or that Facebook actually helps maintain friendships and bring new friendships to light. Were Lanier to see the new research supporting the level of friendships social media offers, perhaps he would change his mind. Many people have his mindset, assuming "social networking sites would diminish relational life" (270, Sparks), but alas, the opposite has been found to be true.

## **Conclusion**

*You Are Not a Gadget* by Jaron Lanier is a book that explores topic after topic in the world of technology. His many theories about the impact the development of technology is having on humankind are relational and carry concern over to society. The loss of creativity and individuality over the preferences of unoriginality on blogs and media sites are causing an existential crisis in those who live to create, and Lanier offers solutions to help bring creativity and individuality back, although at the expense of large companies. He makes sense in his concern of humanoid robots and what it means to be a person, as well in his theory that what is created in the cloud isn't *real* and that needs to be realized.

## References

- Sparks, G. G. (2013). *Media Effects Research: A Basic Overview*, 4th Edition. [Chegg]. Retrieved from <https://ereader.chegg.com/#/books/9781133712121/>
- Deutsche Welle. (2017, October 28). Saudi Arabia grants citizenship to robot Sophia | DW | 28.10.2017. Retrieved from <http://www.dw.com/en/saudi-arabia-grants-citizenship-to-robot-sophia/a-41150856>
- Ferris, R. (2016, October 20). Watch a new Tesla drive itself. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2016/10/20/watch-a-new-tesla-drive-itself.html>
- Knapton, S. (2017, March 02). Artificial human life could soon be grown in lab after embryo breakthrough. Retrieved from <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/2017/03/02/artificial-human-life-could-soon-grown-lab-embryo-breakthrough/>
- Lanier, J. (2010). *You are not a gadget*[Kindle].
- Sophia. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.hansonrobotics.com/robot/sophia/>