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Interview: Jaron Lanier's 10 reasons why you should delete your social media accounts right now

The Silicon Valley star explains why social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are a threat to society.

Interview by Danny Fortson

A soft rapping of knuckle on glass echoes from the foyer of Jaron Lanier's house. It's enough to send the dreadlocked technologist, sitting barefoot at his kitchen table and sipping iced water from an oversized coffee mug, over the edge.

"Your photographer is bugging me," he says in a huff. "Should we consider this done now?"

We are 45 minutes into an interview about Lanier's new book, a timely and terrifying takedown of Facebook, Google and the rest, called *Ten Arguments for Deleting your Social Media Accounts Right Now*.

For the duration, however, the magazine's photographer has been locked out, on Lanier's orders, banished to a small landing outdoors to set up his lights. The 58-year-old tech guru was, apparently, worried that a door might be left ajar, providing an escape route for one of his four cats.

Perhaps just a few more questions before the shoot? "As long as he goes away," he says, chopping the air with his hand. "Just tell him to go away and then lock the door. That's the deal."

After an awkward bit of sign language through the glass, the photographer makes himself scarce and Lanier the Laid-Back has returned, speaking softly but forcefully about the dire threat that social media poses to, well, "our survival as a species". He adds: "If the [human] species dies and some future species of intelligent flying octopus inherits the Earth and they go back over us, they'll probably blame Facebook for our demise."

Time is running out

It is fashionable these days to bash Silicon Valley. Lanier, however, is not just another armchair critic who has surfaced since the Cambridge Analytica data-harvesting scandal seemed to

awaken the western world to the danger lurking behind those cat videos and online personality tests.

A virtual reality pioneer who runs his own research lab at Microsoft, Lanier is the rare techie who works in the industry yet has no qualms about bashing it. And he does so with an eloquence that is hard to argue against. This is his fourth book and, perhaps, his most urgent.

At the heart of his concern is the coupling of the smartphone, an always-on supercomputer and tracking device, and advertising, which has been utterly transformed from a periodic annoyance that would materialise in defined places — during your favourite television show, on a billboard, in a magazine — to something else entirely. “Everyone who is on social media is getting individualised, continuously adjusted stimuli, without a break, so long as they use their smartphones,” he writes. “What might once have been called advertising must now be understood as continuous behaviour modification on a titanic scale.”

A spruced-up advertising business, you might say, hardly signals the end of days. Yet that is exactly what Lanier is arguing. The system deployed by the social media giants, he says, is nothing short of a weapon of mass social destruction, and his conviction is based on his insider knowledge.

“I actually know the algorithms. I’m not an outsider peering in and criticising,” he explains. “I speak as a computer scientist, not as a social scientist or psychologist. From that perspective, I can see that time is running out. The world is changing rapidly under our command, so doing nothing is not an option.”

It is no accident that Twitter seems to attract extremists and bullies, that Instagram makes you sad or that the rise of Facebook has coincided with social breakdown. The most shocking occurrence of the latter happened in Myanmar, where the United Nations recently blamed Mark Zuckerberg’s company for helping spread hate speech that contributed to the genocide of Rohingya Muslims. “Whenever Facebook arrives, we see democracy receding all around the world, whether it’s a rich country or a poor country,” Lanier says flatly. “That’s a trend.”

Indeed, algorithmic empowerment of the worst elements of humanity is not a bug. It is a feature, Lanier argues, because nastiness, outrage and extreme views are the most effective means to increase “engagement” — Valley-speak for time spent — the single metric that these programs are tuned to generate.

He has coined a term for this menace — the Bummer machine, which stands for Behaviour of Users, Modified, and Made into an Empire for Rent.

A bit of a mouthful, but you get the idea. “Negative feelings come on faster and dissipate more slowly. It’s quicker to alienate somebody than it is to build love and trust,” he explains. “So, since this is a computerised system with very rapid response times, everybody in it is doing

whatever will create the effect they desire as rapidly as possible, which means you tend to have advertisers chasing after negative streams without intending to.”

Even more alarming: the Bummer machine is getting stronger every day because what algorithms need more than anything is data to crunch and behaviours to analyse. Two years after Google launched its voice assistant, for example, it can call up a restaurant and book a table, thanks to the millions of hours people have logged telling their Google Home smart speakers what to do.

The more raw material the algorithms have to work with, the more effective they become. Hence Lanier’s call for mass deletion “The arc of history has reversed with the arrival of the Bummer machine,” he says. “Quitting is the only way, for now, to learn what can replace our grand mistake.”

How do you know which companies or services qualify as “Bummer?” The test, apparently, is simple. “Have military intelligence psych-warfare units put money into it? If they have, then you can say it’s Bummer, because that is the only kind of thing they put money into.”

So Facebook, Google, Twitter, Reddit are all a yes. Apple and Amazon, no (as far as we know, anyway).

A traitor in Silicon Valley

Lanier’s home is set back from a winding road high in the hills of Berkeley, with sweeping views across the bay to San Francisco. The front of the house, set amid a thicket of trees and bushes, is hot pink, with a circular submarine window onto a front room stuffed with a bewildering array of misfit musical instruments. Half a dozen violins are scattered about. There’s a percussion instrument that looks like a flying saucer, a harp and something that could be a 6ft, stand-up flute.

When Lanier finally opens the door for our 9.30am meeting, he appears to have just rolled out of bed. He sports a loose-fitting black T-shirt, black cotton pants and dreadlocks that sweep the back of his knees. “Hey, how are you? Come on in,” he says in a thin voice that surprises me. Given the force with which he writes, I expected a thundering baritone.

Lanier is a contradiction, an apostate and an optimist who remains hopeful about the potential of technology to do good for society. Generous with his time and views, he can also be startlingly brusque. (Not long after arriving, we are put on notice: “If you do anything I’ve asked you not to do,” he warns, “I’ll ask you both to leave immediately.”)

He is a harsh critic of his chosen industry, but is also deeply sensitive, scarred by a tragic, difficult upbringing that he shared in his previous book, Dawn of the New Everything.

As a child in New Mexico, he was bullied. His mother, a concentration-camp survivor, died in a traffic accident when he was nine. His father allowed his only child to design a geodesic dome that would become their home. During the years it took to build, they lived in a canvas tent. At 14, Lanier, a gifted student but socially awkward, began taking maths classes at New Mexico State University.

After an abortive stint in New York studying art, he returned to New Mexico, where he worked as an assistant midwife. The father of a baby he delivered gifted him a car riddled with bullet holes, which he drove to California. In Silicon Valley, he found his people: hippies, libertarians and peaceniks interested in using technology to better the world.

He worked at Atari, the game console maker, made and lost a fortune with virtual-reality headsets and co-founded several startups, the last of which was a facial-recognition software developer that was bought by Google in 2006. Since then, he has worked as a consultant at Microsoft Research, experimenting on the ragged edge of technology.

He has long been uneasy, however, about the direction in which the industry is heading, a trajectory rooted, he says, in the counterculture of the early 1980s.

“In the earliest days of companies such as Facebook and Google, there was a very strong kind of idealism in Silicon Valley that, in the future, everything would be done by volunteer groups that were funded by advertisers. So instead of commercial television or commercial movies with paid directors and studios, unpaid volunteers would come together just as they did for Wikipedia,” he explains. “It wasn’t just a genuine belief. It was a severe orthodoxy and if you challenged it, you lost friends and career opportunities.”

The belief that the world would gratefully accept the gifts bestowed by the valley elites and then harmoniously transition to a techno-utopia of their making has, finally, begun to crack. Lanier, who has always been deeply interested in the intersection of technology with humans, had been warning of the dangers of that thinking since the early 1990s. His rebellious streak came with a cost. “I was one of a very small number of people and it felt quite lonely,” he says. “I was seen as a traitor.”

Now, the world seems to be catching up. Much of his latest book revolves — in one way or another — around empathy and how social media is destroying it. That is a huge problem, because “empathy is the fuel that runs a decent society”, he writes. “Without it, only dry rules and competitions for power are left.”

The argument goes like this: algorithms are optimised to create engagement and they work extremely well. The average millennial checks their phone 150 times a day. It is typically the first thing they do when they wake up and the last before they go to sleep. More than 2bn people are on Facebook, roughly the same number of followers as Christianity.

And each of them is given a tailored experience, crafted by algorithms bloodlessly probing for ways to poke the lizard brain. The common experience, in other words, is dying, which makes it hard for us to understand each other. People who you might have disagreed with 10 years ago now just seem unhinged.

The result is that society has “darkened a few shades”, Lanier argues. “If you don’t see the dark ads, the ambient whispers, the cold-hearted memes and the ridicule-filled customised feed that someone else sees, that person will just seem crazy to you. And that is our new Bummer world. We seem crazy to each other because Bummer is robbing us of our theories of one another’s minds.”

Hence the explosion of nastiness, a great blossoming of “assholes”. Over 160 pages, Lanier uses the term 126 times. Indeed, the title of one of his 10 arguments is “Social media is making you an asshole”.

When I point out his prolific use of the term, he breaks into a high-pitch, rat-a-tat-tat cackle. “I blame my wife,” he says. “She likes butt jokes.” His wife, Lena, has padded into the kitchen, quietly making her breakfast. She smiles at his jibe, which I take as a silent admission that she does, in fact, like butt jokes.

Now, you may not feel like you match that description, but stop and think about that snarky tweet you sent to a stranger, that joke you made at someone’s expense on Facebook, the stolen minutes you spent reading the negative comments beneath a YouTube video. It is a subtle but unrelenting process, like climate change, Lanier argues. But instead of melting the ice caps, it is chipping away at your humanity.

“If you use Bummer platforms you’ve probably been changed at least a little,” he writes. “While we can’t know which details would be different without it, we do know about the big picture. Take climate change — Bummer will lead us into hell if we don’t self-correct.”

What about all the good that social media does, you ask. Lanier does not argue that political movements like, say, the Arab Spring or the Black Lives Matter movement in America are empowered. But that is only the first chapter of a story that gets very, very dark. “It’s like the first hit from a pusher,” he explains.

When groups organise via social media, it inevitably makes some people uncomfortable or angry. And just as it does with peace protesters, the system’s “natural algorithmic reflex” is incredibly efficient at helping those in opposition find each other, integrating them into common flows of posts, likes and shares. “And here’s the kicker,” Lanier says. “Since negativity works better on these platforms, the same tools that you used to pursue your goals are more effective for the people who come out in response. So Isis gets more bang for the buck on social media than the Arab Spring activists. The racists got more mileage than Black Lives Matter, creating this upsurge in a racist nationalist movement in the US of a kind that we haven’t seen in generations.”

Lanier's solution: become a cat

So what to do? Lanier's solution is, by far, the simplest. Stop. Every time you log on, you are adding to a fire that is burning your house down. So delete your accounts. Douse the flames. But that is just one of many ideas that have begun to bubble up as people begin to reckon with the "behaviour modification empires" that have become so central to life.

Chris Hughes, who made almost \$500m as a co-founder of Facebook, is one of a growing number of execs who have turned against their creations.

A few hours after Lanier laid out his plan at his kitchen table — and spent a fitful five minutes with the Sunday Times photographer — Hughes and a handful of other apostates got together 400 miles to the south, at the Beverly Hilton in Los Angeles. They were there for the Milken Institute Global Conference, an annual powwow where the great and good speak worthily about issues such as terrorism, famine and inequality.

This year, they were also talking about the Bummer machine (though they didn't call it that). There is more and more of this these days. Having acknowledged the danger, attentions are now turning to how best to deal with it. Hughes's idea? A social media sovereign wealth fund, much like the public oil funds set up by Norway or Alaska. "These companies are making enormous, historic profits from consumer data," he says. "Maybe you take a 5% royalty from their revenues, which goes into a fund, and then cut a cheque to every American."

Simply going cold turkey isn't practical, he argues, not least because you would effectively be turning yourself into a digital hermit. "More than 80% of the social traffic on the web is going through Facebook servers [when you count WhatsApp and Instagram]," he says. "There are no other alternatives out there."

Tristan Harris, a former Google design ethicist and founder of the Center for Humane Technology, an anti-social-media NGO, has a different, arguably more radical plan. Facebook, he reckons, should be turned into a "public benefit corporation", a quasi utility that is heavily regulated and is required, by statute, to serve a public good. It is simply too powerful, he said, to be beholden only to its shareholders and under the control of one private citizen. (Mark Zuckerberg has majority control of the company's voting stock.)

He compared the \$520bn social media giant to an omnipotent and devious priest, who takes confession from 2bn people, then sells those deep, dark secrets to the highest bidder. "It's a dangerous business model," he says. "On the grounds of that asymmetric power alone, we should reclassify Facebook."

Other ideas include the addition of social media health warnings, like the graphic images of blackened lungs on a pack of cigarettes. Facebook itself is considering offering a subscription, ad-free alternative.

In the wake of Zuckerberg's testimony in front of Congress over the Cambridge Analytica scandal, new rules are in the works. And on Friday, the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation comes into force, granting greater privacy protections to Britons and other Europeans.

Yet these are all so much tinkering around the edges of the Bummer machine. Lanier's advice is blissfully straightforward. If we are all "well-trained dogs" in this grand social manipulation, as he suggests, then "your immediate goal is to be a cat".

He's serious. Lanier, as you may have gathered, is a cat person. The silhouette of one of his felines graces the cover of the US edition of Ten Arguments. That is because, unlike dogs, which can be trained, cats exist in our world, but are impervious to instruction or control. For Lanier, they are role models.

"Your goal should not necessarily be to force governments to regulate or nationalise Facebook before you'll rejoin, or to force Facebook to change its business model, even though those are achievements that must precede the long-term survival of our species," Lanier writes. "Your immediate goal is to be a cat."

It seems a big ask for 2bn-plus people simply to go dark on Facebook. Does he have any hope? Lanier smiles. "Absolutely. To me, the critic is the true optimist, because the critic is the person who believes that things can get better. The pessimist is complacent."

As if on cue, one of Lanier's cats curls around his calf.

JARON LANIER'S 10 REASONS TO DELETE YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS

- 1 "You are losing your free will"
- 2 "Quitting social media is the most finely targeted way to resist the insanity of our times"
- 3 "Social media is turning you into an asshole"
- 4 "Social media is undermining truth"
- 5 "Social media is making what you say meaningless"
- 6 "Social media is destroying your capacity for empathy"
- 7 "Social media is making you unhappy"
- 8 "Social media doesn't want you to have economic dignity"
- 9 "Social media is making politics impossible"
- 10 "Social media hates your soul"

How to delete your Facebook account

It's easy to find the button to "deactivate" your Facebook, but you need to know where to look if you want to kill it off completely. Go to the drop-down bar at the top right of any Facebook web page and click "Settings". Then click "your Facebook information". At this point you can "Download your information" — a function that saves all your data (pictures, birthdays, messages) into a zip file on your hard drive. Then click "View" on the "Delete your account and information" section and, on the next page, hit "Delete my account". And you're free.

"I found my inner troll. I stopped using the stuff because I didn't like who I was becoming" Jaron Lanier on the early days of social media, how Arianna Huffington persuaded him to become a top blogger and why he went cold turkey (and wants us all to do the same)

Many things about social media have changed over the years, but the basic form was already around when I first got into computers in the late 1970s. Back then it amounted to little more than commenting, just a bunch of people adding their text. There wasn't any voting for favourite posts, nor did algorithms customise your feed. Very basic.

But I noticed something horrifying all those years ago. Sometimes, out of nowhere, I would get into a fight with someone, or a group of people. It was so weird. We'd start insulting each other, trying to score points, getting under each other's skin.

And about incredibly stupid stuff, like whether or not someone knew what they were talking about when it came to brands of pianos. Really. I'd stew between posts. "I am not ignorant! I know about pianos! How dare that moron say those horrible things about me? I know, I'll ruin his reputation by tricking him into saying something stupid." This happened so often that it became normal. Not just for me, but for everyone. It was chaotic human weather. There would be a nice morning and suddenly a storm would roll in. In order to avoid falling into asshole behaviour you had to make yourself fake-nice. You'd have to be saccharine polite, choosing your words super carefully, walking on eggshells. That sucked.

I just stopped using the stuff because I didn't like who I was becoming. You know the adage that you should choose a partner on the basis of who you become when you're around the person? That's a good way to choose technologies, too.

When some friends started a pioneering an online community called the Well in the 1990s, they gave me an account, but I never posted a single thing. Same story much later, when I helped some buddies start an online world called Second Life. In the early 2000s, an enterprising woman named Arianna Huffington got me to blog on her Huffington Post for a while. I have to tell you how she did it. We were at a fancy conference for rich and influential people in the Colorado Rockies. I was sitting on a bench with my arm resting on a rounded cement wall surrounding a garbage can. Arianna came along and sat on my arm, trapping it. "Arianna — oh, you didn't notice; let me get my arm out." In her thick Greek accent: "Do you know what some men would pay for this privilege? I will release your hand if you will blog for me." So I did it. Briefly I was one of the HuffPost's top bloggers, always on the front page. But I found myself falling into that old problem again whenever I read the comments, and I could not get myself to

ignore them. I would feel this weird low-level boiling rage inside me. Or I'd feel this absurd glow when people liked what I wrote, even if what they said didn't indicate that they had paid much attention to it. Comment authors were mostly seeking attention for themselves.

We were all in the same stew, manipulating each other, inflating ourselves. After a short while, I noticed that I'd write things I didn't even believe in order to get a rise out of readers. I wrote stuff that I knew people wanted to hear, or the opposite, because I knew it would be inflammatory.

Oh my God! I was back in that same place. I quit — again.

Of all the 10 arguments in my book, this is the one that really gets to me viscerally. I don't want to be an asshole. Or a fake-nice person. I want to be authentically nice, and certain online designs seem to fight against that with magical force. That's the core reason why I don't have accounts on Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat or any of the rest.

You will see fake accounts in my name. There's even a supposed @RealJaronLanier on Twitter. But I have no idea who that is. Not me. I don't think I'm better than you because I don't have social media accounts. Maybe I'm worse; maybe you can handle the stuff better than I can.

I've observed, however, that since social media took off, assholes are having more of a say in the world. The biggest assholes get the most attention, and they often end up giving a platform its flavour. Even if there are corners of the platform where not everyone is an asshole all the time, those corners feel penned in, because the assholes are waiting just outside.

It's not helpful to think of the world as being divided into assholes and non- assholes or, if you prefer, trolls and victims. Each of us has an inner troll. In the early days, before everyone was doing it, the air was clearer and it was easier to notice how bizarre it is when your inner troll starts talking. It's like an ugly alien living inside you that you long ago forgot about. Don't let your inner troll take control! If it happens when you're in a particular situation, avoid that situation. It doesn't matter if it's an online platform, a relationship or a job. Your character is like your health — more valuable than anything you can buy. Don't throw it away.

It might not seem like it at first, but I'm an optimist. I don't think we have to throw the whole digital world away. Our problem is blessedly specific. If we could just get rid of the deleterious business model — where the incentive is to find customers ready to pay to modify someone else's behaviour, and which amplifies negative emotions more than positive ones — then the underlying technology might not be so bad.

Some have compared social media to the tobacco industry, but I will not. The better analogy is paint that contains lead. When it became undeniable that lead was harmful, no one declared that houses should never be painted again. Instead, after pressure and legislation, lead-free paints became the new standard. Smart people simply waited to buy paint until there was a

safe version on sale. Similarly, smart people should delete their accounts until non-toxic varieties are available.