

Review of 'You are not a gadget' by Jaron Lanier

A few years ago the technology commentator Kevin Kelly published an interesting book called 'New Rules for the new economy' which argued that the internet has brought in new economic rules which trump the old foundation of our economy: scarcity. Through its ability to disseminate information, Kelly argued that suddenly making information widely available was more valuable than controlling it tightly and pricing it high. For example, to take the (now out of date) technology of the fax machine. If you are the only person you know who owns a fax, its scarcity does not make it valuable, in fact it's the exact opposite: it makes it useless! The more faxes there are, the more valuable yours becomes. Openness is, according to this viewpoint, a great virtue in the networked economy.

Jaron Lanier, the iconoclastic inventor of 'virtual reality', has a different perspective which he outlines in 'You are not a gadget' (Penguin, 2010). His target is the so-called 'Web 2.0': the latest developments on the web which emphasise the individual users putting up their own content and sharing content directly with other users (e.g. Facebook, file-sharing, YouTube). Lanier believes in the power of technology to enhance Human creativity, but he just doesn't think our current web 2.0 model is doing that. For example, of Wikipedia and Linux he writes: "Let's suppose that back in the 1980s I had said, "In a quarter century when the digital revolution has made great progress and computer chips are millions of times faster than they are now, humanity will finally win the prize of being able to write a new encyclopaedia and a new version of Unix!" It would have sounded utterly pathetic."

Also, he argues that that through creating an expectation of information being free we are making it harder and harder for many creative people (musicians and writers/journalists in

particular) to make a decent, middle-class income from their work.

There are three other major criticisms he makes in the book:

CROWDSOURCING DIMINISHES INDIVIDUAL CREATIVITY

Sites like Wikipedia and Rotten Tomatoes are based on the notion that if you aggregate the opinions of many people, you will eventually alight on the truth. However, Lanier argues that: “Emphasizing the crowd means deemphasizing individual humans in the design of society, and when you ask people not to be people, they revert to bad moblike behaviors.”

In some instances the average opinion of the crowd may be useful, but in others it merely hides individuality. For example, he argues that web 2.0 has had a bad effect on the creativity of pop culture. Every decade of the 20th Century, up to the 90s, had its own unique musical style; even to the extent that you can hear a piece of music for the first time and pretty accurately guess which year it came from. But this has, he argues, now ended, and popular music is largely derivative of earlier styles:

“Pop culture has entered into a nostalgic malaise. Online culture is dominated by trivial mashups of the culture that existed before the onset of mashups, and by fandom responding to the dwindling outposts of centralized mass media. It is a culture of reaction without action. Where is the new music? Everything is retro, retro, retro.”

LOCK-IN

As we digitise more and more aspects of life we are forced to define them in ways a computer can understand, and by having to rigidly define what a thing is, you also have to leave out what it is not. The problem is that such definitions can become entrenched and almost impossible to get rid of. For

example, the width of 19th Century railway tracks defined the width of the tunnels in the London Underground system, which are now too narrow for modern needs (such as the installation of air-conditioning). As another example, he talks about how the electronic music format MIDI has narrowed the range of music sounds available to us: "Before MIDI, a musical note was a bottomless idea that transcended absolute definition. After MIDI, a musical note was no longer just an idea, but a rigid, mandatory structure you couldn't avoid in the aspects of life that had gone digital. A thousand years from now, when a descendant of ours is travelling at relativistic speeds to explore a new star system, she will probably be annoyed by some awful beepy MIDI-driven music to alert her that the antimatter filter needs to be recalibrated."

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE OR ARTIFICIAL STUPIDITY?

However, it's not just standards that are restricting, the ways we relate to technology are diminishing our humanity. For example, he argues that by assuming that computers are (or can become) 'intelligent' we diminish our conception of intelligence, and our humanity. It's hard to yet see the big consequences of this, but it does lead to bad technology design: software such as Microsoft's Bob which tries to anticipate a user's behaviour (i.e. trying to act intelligently) often just ends up being irritating and often just forces the user to change their behaviour in order to fit in with the software's assumptions!

'You are not a gadget' is a fascinating and thought-provoking book and I definitely recommend it.