

An old quarrel, revisited

Lars Wessman*

Wall Street Institute, Porto (Portugal) & University of Toronto

ARTICLE INFO

Article Type:
Book Review

Article History:
Received: 2011-03-08
Revised: 2011-07-17
Accepted: 2011-08-01

Key Words:
Mark Helprin
Evgeny Morozov
Jaron Lanier
Internet Culture
The Self
The Individual

ABSTRACT

This comparative book review of *You are Not a Gadget* (Knopf, 2010, 224 pages) by Jaron Lanier, *Digital Barbarism* (Harper, 2010, 232 pages) by Mark Helprin, and *The Net Delusion* (PublicAffairs, 2011, 432 pages) by Evgeny Morozov, examines the anxiety about loss of personhood and the external threats to the individual present in society, from very different points of view. The author states that it is neither internet-boosterism, nor the information-freedom or copyleft movements that threaten the individual's social position and freedom of expression. The real threats to the individual are those who would try to control free expression, whether such people or organizations are represented by the state, corporate interests, or perhaps even a small group of well-motivated activists.

@Journal of Professional Communication, all rights reserved.

“**I**t’s the early twenty-first century, and that means that these words will mostly be read by nonpersons, automatons or numb mobs of people no longer acting as individuals.” This is how *You Are Not A Gadget* begins, announcing a theme that is becoming increasingly popular over the last few years: anxiety about loss of personhood and the external threats to the individual that are present in society.

This theme is also taken up in Mark Helprin’s *Digital Barbarism* and Evgeny Morozov’s *Net Delusion*. Each author comes from a different perspective: Lanier examines the potential for the internet to erase or hide the person through humans choosing to fit themselves to their computational machines; Helprin rails against the potential for society – through the internet and its needs – to remove from the individual the fruit of his or her labour; and Morozov’s book details the power the internet lends to help the state extend its control over the individual, so that the individual is erased in a political sense.

Lanier refers to this threat as “Digital Maoism,” where information is shared without limit through digital technology and information sharing is identified

*Corresponding author. (Lars Wessman)

Email: lars.wessman@gmail.com, Twitter: @TheWaterOx

©Journal of Professional Communication, ISSN: 1920-685. All rights reserved. See front matter.

with freedom. The threat that he identifies within digital Maoism is the possibility that the only way that a person can “count,” or have a public face in the digital Maoists’ Web 2.0 world, is to fit into one of the categories that have been pre-defined for the users of a normative website, such as Facebook. Another danger Lanier identifies within Digital Maoism is that the individual may simply be reduced to a faceless instance of a set of traits that has been identified by a statistical analysis of the information the person produces and shares. What is important in this world are not the individuals who make it up, but the system for sharing information between individuals and about individuals, as well as the income that can be generated by exploiting that information for advertising or other purposes. According to Lanier, there is no room in this system for individuals or individual creativity. In fact, it will reduce the human being to a link-clicker and comment-maker who no longer has the capacity to have a personal relationship with the world. The needs of the computational machine will be more important than those of the humans that use it.

The Net Delusion is Evgeny Morozov’s reaction to the euphoria of the Digital Maoists around the small role that Web 2.0 properties have played in various public protest movements in places outside the Western world. Morozov sees great danger in getting caught up in this euphoria because, while the internet and the communicative power of Web 2.0 are potentially great tools for people to organize against oppressive governments, given of the inherent openness of the medium, the same tools are equally great for oppressive governments and paragonovernmental organizations to monitor and track dissidents, as well as infiltrate their groups. Morozov asserts that we should not believe that the internet is a high road to freedom. In fact, he suggests that believing this is akin to belief in magic and incurs the opportunity cost of ignoring more effective means of bringing democracy to areas that live under oppressive government.

Helprin takes up this worry in the question of copyright and copyright extension. His alternately funny and unfair dramatization of his fight with internet opponents of copyright, whom he portrays as a pack of ignorant and vulgar fools, is an essential part of the argument that he makes in *Digital Barbarism*. Without copyright, Helprin fears that creators of intellectual works will not have the tools necessary to defend the integrity of their works and thus not have the time to produce them because they will not be able to make a living from the proceeds of their labour. Rather, he suggests that if the digital Maoists have their way and abolish copyright in the name of information sharing, we will be left with a morass of publicity writing and YouTube comments where we once had a culture.

Much of Helprin's argument in favour of copyright mostly updates and revises arguments made out of fears of the rise of “mass man” as the effects of both print and radio communication were being assimilated at the beginning

and middle of the 20th century by such people as Gustave Le Bon, José Ortega y Gasset, Edward Bernays and Walter Lippmann. Rather than the radio or television, Helprin's target is the internet and its potential for "lowering the tone". The concern about the power of the mass here is so strong that Helprin often argues in an all-or-nothing manner, ignoring the ways that his concerns can be addressed within an internet-driven world that has shorter-term copyright or perhaps even no copyright at all.

Lanier's major concern is that the limits of human expression are reduced by the needs and weaknesses of the Web 2.0 computational systems. This complaint is similar in form to the complaints about mass society of the 20th century, but is specifically directed against the corporations and their evangelizing fellow travellers who wish to make money out of directing and profiting from the desires of the "mob" through the internet. His great fear is that we may lessen ourselves to attain better use of systems that we have created – systems that are thus lesser than we are.

As I write this review, I'm sitting on a terrace overlooking the ocean. The breeze is cool and braces me, bringing clarity to my thoughts as I write. Beside me are some people who have a laptop out on the table and are cackling with glee over whatever YouTube videos dance lightly across their eyes. Lanier fears that we are represented with an either/or, which is implicit in this situation: a binary choice between the thinking individual or the unthinking consumer. Reality, however, is more complex. A few hours ago, I was looking at YouTube videos myself. Who knows what my fellow café dwellers were doing? Perhaps one of my café mates was mulling a cure for cancer. We engage in different ways at different times. We shouldn't allow ourselves to be over impressed by the cumulative result of people blowing off steam, which the all-remembering databases of Web 2.0 dutifully record completely and accurately.

Taking a step back, we see that there is so much personal creativity on the internet that it's impossible to take it all in. To get an idea of how we should probably look at content production in Web 2.0, we might keep in mind the Pareto Principle, which asserts that the larger part of the valuable work is done – in any domain – by a motivated and competent minority. Even on the individual level, most creative people lament the reality that their own time follows along a similar proportion of productivity/unproductivity. What is important to the flow of creativity is that we can find it, and that is what Web 2.0 makes possible (let's not forget that Google and the Page Rank algorithm are Web 2.0 technologies that pre-date the name). Web 2.0 would be the disaster that Lanier fears only if it were the only thing on the internet: a system for connecting people without people to connect.

It is not sufficient to argue, as Lanier does, that since the Web 2.0 and Open Source methods can't be found to be directly responsible for new creative works, they fail to support individual creativity. A sensible claim for the value

unbounded information sharing is not that it leads directly to new creative works, but that it allows creative people to get quickly up to speed with what has been done in the area that interests them and extends their ability to find new sources of inspiration that they can access online or offline. Information sharing looks backward, and in doing so, helps us look forward.

It is clear that the state can use Web 2.0 to keep a closer eye on individuals or oppress them. That is what the technology was designed to do – share information and make it easy to generate information out of the act of sharing information. Where the political problem of the early 20th century identified by Bernays and Lippmann is directing the opinion of the “mob” to the right subjects and attitudes; the political problem of early the 21st century is more one of avoiding having the internet be transformed from a tool of communication to a tool of oppression. Morozov argues that the most effective tools for achieving these goals are not to be found on the internet itself.

A careful reading of these three books shows that it is neither internet-boosterism, nor the information-freedom or copyleft movements that threaten the individual’s social position and freedom of expression. Rather, the real threats to the individual are those who would try to control free expression, whether such people or organizations are represented by the state, corporate interests, or perhaps even a small group of well-motivated activists.

While the internet, like any technology, suggests its own preferred uses, these uses take place in the context of our common nature as human beings. Our technology determines how we go about meeting our needs, but it has yet to fundamentally change them, however much we might imagine that it has. It is at the same time a comforting and awful idea, but one that tends to work in favour of our authors’ views, even when those fears might be exaggerated, against those of the Digital Maoists.

References

- Helprin, M. (2010). *Digital Barbarism*. New York: Harper.
- Lanier, J. (2010). *You are not a Gadget*. New York: Knopf.
- Morozov, Y. (2011). *The Net Delusion*. New York: Public Affairs.