

The Role of Social Media in a Civil Society

A presentation by Jaron Lanier, summarized by Ben Dubke

What is Social Media?

Lanier began his presentation by defining “social media.” In its most fundamental sense, social media is any personal connection or communication via the internet, and Lanier sees this broad concept as a net positive for society. He gave the example, “Before the internet, people with unusual diseases couldn’t find each other to compare notes, and then once the internet started working, they could, which is transformative. That’s just one of thousands examples I could come up with.”

What people usually mean by “social media,” however, is a particular business model built around “the science of behavior modification.” Lanier stated, “Behavior modification is measuring what you have experienced and using it in a feedback loop to change what you experience next, in order to modify your behavior in the future, and to have an adaptive algorithm that optimizes itself to find out what kind of change in experience will have an impact on your behavior.” The modern techniques of modifying behavior, also known as operant conditioning, originated in the work of Ivan Pavlov and B. F. Skinner. These researchers investigated how they could change animals’ behavior patterns using rewards and punishments, often small candies and electric shocks.

Lanier explained that social media companies used the same principles to manipulate their users: “What Facebook discovered is that instead of candy and electric shocks, you can use vanity and social fears, so when somebody feels like they’ve been liked or followed, or have gone viral for a day, those are the candy. And when someone feels they are the targeted one, or ostracized, or ignored, those are the electric shocks.” Social media companies have developed

algorithms to find more and more reliable ways to keep users on their platforms, all with the goal of increasing profits from advertising. The algorithms they employ have discovered that social pressures are very effective methods to reach that goal. Lanier went on, “People are social creatures—we think together, our genetic heritage is to be together and to think together—so social pleasure and social pain are not arbitrary or incidental. They are profound and central to our experience of life.”

The Lizard Brain

What is the problem with this business model? In order to find the most efficient doses of social pleasure and pain, the algorithms must constantly evaluate themselves by tracking any changes to users’ behavior. Lanier explained, “The responses that you can read from people...tend to be the pretty dramatic ones, like if you click on something a lot or hover over something or comment on something, and it’s right in real-time so that the algorithm can understand what the cause was that created that effect.” The actions the algorithms can track tend to be governed by the brain’s instantaneous “fight-or-flight” response, cognitive activity which Lanier termed “the lizard brain.” Over long periods of repeated exposure, social media users’ thought patterns begin to shift. In Lanier’s words, “If you’re exciting the lizard brain a lot, you make people into lizards.”

Lanier went on to describe the effects of the lizard brain, “This is the problem that you gradually bring out the worst in people, where you have this totally contextless, weird, triggered response that is a normal part of being human, but normally wouldn’t happen so much. When you’re under a behavior modification regime, there’s this effect on you that you become a little more vain, a little more socially nervous, a little more socially fearful, a little more aggressive, a

little more xenophobic, a little more irritable, a little more paranoid.” Lanier was careful to say that all these qualities existed in people before the age of social media. Social media does not immediately transform all its users’ personalities, but it exaggerates these parts of human behavior. It causes an overall, ambient change in how the population thinks and acts.

Lanier claimed that removing the social media algorithms would improve our society and reduce the characteristics associated with the lizard brain. He admitted this is difficult to prove because all the experimental data is kept under lock and key by the social media companies who first discovered the business model, especially Facebook. Nevertheless, researchers occasionally decide to whistle blow, and “from the little peeks we’ve had of their research, we know that these algorithms do have a profound effect.”

Social Media and Civil Discourse

Lanier argued for a correlation between social media and the apparent paucity of civil discourse. He explained, “There’s always been societies becoming more or less civil at different times...It’s not that we’re necessarily seeing the worst that there’s ever been of humanity—we’re certainly not. We’re seeing a simultaneous, global effect, and that is actually different.” He even noted, “It usually happens within a few years of the Facebook brand becoming big in a given country or region.” On a broad scale, “All these places in the world that were kind of doing better in terms of democracy and civility and rational approaches to problems all started to get nuts at the same time, and that is the correlation that leads right to the door of Facebook and a few other platforms.”

Lanier also connected the lack of civil discourse online to the massive wealth and social influence concentrated in tech companies. He theorized, “I think that [concentration of wealth

and influence] leads many people around the world to have this strange feeling of their own futures being stolen. People wonder if they'll be obsolete, if their children will be obsolete. There's kind of a general lack of belief in a path toward a future, which is something that is absolutely essential to civilization, and I think that's a sort of correlate of the success of the lizard brain methodology. It's kind of robbed people of hope on some level." Lanier then tied this issue back to civil discourse, "If you turn the economy into a competition of who can manipulate who, and there's network effects...this does rob people of their futures in a material and real sense, and when you combine that with the lizard brain amplification, I think that that's a lot of why it's become so difficult to have conversations or to think or talk lately."

The Chinese Model

Two coexisting models have emerged of using social media to control populations. Lanier termed them the "Silicon Valley model" and the "Chinese model." The American corporations of Silicon Valley use their influence to manipulate their users' beliefs and behaviors, but according to Lanier: "[Silicon Valley-style technocracy] tries to keep an arm's length from specific events. For instance...it's not the most common thing for a Silicon Valley figure to directly intervene and try to prefer certain opinions to others or to suppress certain things."

The Chinese model, however, "is kind of based on [direct intervention]." Although the Chinese model shares similar algorithms and personnel with the Silicon Valley model, "In the Chinese model there's an additional belief that you can and should control specific communication—speech about Tibet, or Taiwan, or the Uyghurs—the things that are hot buttons for the Chinese Communist Party." Lanier went on, "Despite believing in that first-order,

concrete controlling of content, using an enormous army of content controllers—that is not typical of the Western model—everything else is similar. The degree of power concentration, wealth concentration, influence concentration that happens in the Silicon Valley model is similar to what the Communist Party can achieve with their system. It’s somewhat more abstractly applied, but the difference is probably less than the similarity.”

Lanier argued that China’s cyberactivity presents some geopolitical concerns for the United States. Although very few people, if any, have full knowledge of China’s strategy in its complexities and contingencies, he offered a few general impressions of China’s goals, “[China] thinks in long terms, and a lot of senior people in China are still upset about [being slighted in recent centuries] and feel that China should naturally be atop the world order...I actually think China has a view of the future of a world that works overall that they don’t necessarily control completely. I think what they would like is to have a world that makes them rich, but I don’t think they want to be administering Chile or something...I do want to say that we have a national security issue with allowing China to enter the platform war so successfully...If you own TikTok, there are so many things you could do. There are so many ways to be an evil mastermind if you own TikTok.”

Cancel Culture / Free Speech

Social media can seem like a contributor to free speech because almost anyone can post almost anything they like. Lanier pointed out, however, that this environment is actually damaging for productive discourse, “What looks like free speech is not. Real free speech can only happen with a little bit of friction and a little bit of structure...so there’s a little bit of a chance that someone will hear what somebody said.” He used the analogy of a soap box to

explain that the volume of content on social media drowns out those seeking to speak constructively, “If you want to shut down a public square where people can get up on a soap box and speak freely, one way to do it would be to arrest the people on the soap box, but the more efficient way would be to hand out bullhorns to every single person in the audience.”

Cancel culture is often characterized as an enemy of free speech online. Lanier expressed a nuanced view of cancel culture, saying, “I often find myself...in sympathy with the impulse, [but] often feeling that the execution of cancellation is not productive and often more destructive than it needs to be, and often not ultimately achieving the benefits that the people achieving it are hoping for.” He mentioned the “Me Too” and Black Lives Matter movements as examples of social justice movements that tangibly improved the real world, in part by using cancellation. Lanier also speculated at the deeper roots of cancel culture, “I think that a lot of the younger people who get involved in cancel culture circles on Twitter...are fighting a looming fear of powerlessness and irrelevance in the society, and [cancel culture] gives them a foothold on relevance and power, which of course everybody wants.”

Data Dignity

What is the alternative to social media’s present form? Can people interact online apart from the current system built around advertising and behavior manipulation? For years, Lanier has been a proponent of an alternative model called “data dignity.” He explained, “In data dignity...you treat any data that exists because a person exists—in other words, any piece of data that wouldn’t exist if a given person didn’t exist...[as] inseparably owned by them. They have moral rights to it...It becomes a part of them, just like a part of their body to which they have

rights. However, what they can do is they can join into a confederation with other people to create an organization with enough power to bargain for licensing arrangements for their data.” These organizations are called “mediators of individual data” (MIDs).

According to Lanier, MIDs should take the place of social media corporations, “They’re the first entities that can exist on the internet that can actually advocate for people, because right now there’s no one positioned to have fiduciary responsibility for people—there’s no one positioned to be an advocate of any kind,” Currently, social media is “a brutal, extractive thing” because the corporations serve their own interests, not users’. Also, competition on social media tends to be winner-take-all. Lanier argued that a MID would soften this effect: “If there are a million wannabe influencers and only a thousand of them become really successful influencers, according to whatever was negotiated within the governance of that MID, it might be the case that [the winners of the game] benefit quite a lot...but not to the total expense of everybody else. Everybody else gets at least a little bit.”

Lanier likened data dignity to the Total Quality Management movement in business. Launched by the work of W. Edwards Deming in the 1980s, this was an effort to improve manufacturing using quality control. According to Lanier, Deming’s breakthrough was that “this information has to not just go to engineers and owners...It has to go to the workers in the factory lines so they can improve what they do with knowledge.” The same idea should be applied to today’s high-tech world. Oftentimes, tech companies enlist users to generate data without ever telling them the data’s purpose. Lanier gave the example of CAPTCHA games, which require users to identify all the tiles that contain fire hydrants, or stoplights, or some other object. This is an approach Google uses, without telling users, to gain free data to improve its AI for self-

driving cars. On the other hand, “With MIDs, people can become aware of what the purpose of data is and improve it.”

Lanier closed his presentation by describing his vision of a thriving online world. “Let’s say in the future there’ll be thousand, tens of thousands of new types of robots and new types of algorithms that are doing this and that. Whenever someone hears about one of those, instead of saying, ‘My jobs going to be obsolete. What will my children do? What will their children do?’ they’ll say, ‘This is a great opportunity—I’m going to join the MID and make the data for that thing better and get paid for it and be proud of it. I’m going to make it more creative, and it’s going to be like a new art form.’ Instead of just solving one problem in a boring way once, it becomes an eternal new platform of creativity for an open-ended culture that goes on forever. That transformation is what hope has to look like in a high-tech society. I don’t think there’s any other way. That’s data dignity.”