



## Autumn HT1: Ten Arguments for Deleting your Social Media Accounts Right Now, by Jaron Lanier



Shared DEAR text

Archbishop Holgate's School

Year 10

# Year 10 Stretch Tasks

These stretch tasks are optional. If you enjoyed this half-term's reading, why not have a go at stretching yourself with one of the tasks below? You can complete as many as you like from the menu, and could even make up your own task if you'd prefer. When you have completed the task/s, please take them to Mr Avery in History or Dr King in Maths.

Watch the movie <i>The Social Network</i> and write a review in the light of Ten Arguments for Deleting your Social Media Accounts Right Now.	Produce an A3 poster depicting a summary of each of the ten arguments and a rating out of ten for how convincing they are.	Write a report about John Lanier, including biographical, professional, and artistic information.	Write a short story from the perspective of someone working at Facebook and their reaction to reading Lanier's book.
Write a short comparison of the half-term reading with another book or film on a similar theme.	Produce an A4 drawing or painting of something or someone depicted in the half-term reading.	Write a description of something you have experienced in your own life that the half-term reading reminded you of.	Write a poem inspired by the half-term reading.
How would you explain the theme of the half-term reading? Which aspects of it best conveyed that theme?	How would you describe the language used in the half-term reading? How does it compare with the language used in other things you've read?	What was your favourite part of the half-term reading? Why? How would you describe what you liked about it?	What did you find most evocative about the half-term reading? Why? How would you convince someone else to read it?



## Jaron Lanier: Ten Arguments for Deleting your Social Media Accounts Right Now, 2019

Find the book in the library or here:

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Arguments-Deleting-Social-Media-Accounts/dp/1847925391>



A timely call-to-arms from a Silicon Valley pioneer. You might have trouble imagining life without your social media accounts, but virtual reality pioneer Jaron Lanier insists that we're better off without them. In *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*, Lanier, who participates in no social media, offers powerful and personal reasons for all of us to leave these dangerous online platforms.



### **ARGUMENT ONE - YOU ARE LOSING YOUR FREE WILL WELCOME TO THE CAGE THAT GOES EVERYWHERE WITH YOU**

Something entirely new is happening in the world. Just in the last five or ten years, nearly everyone started to carry a little device called a smartphone on their person all the time that's suitable for algorithmic behavior modification. A lot of us are also using related devices called smart speakers on our kitchen counters or in our car dashboards. We're being tracked and measured constantly, and receiving engineered feedback all the time. We're being hypnotized little by little by technicians we can't see, for purposes we don't know. We're all lab animals now.

Algorithms gorge on data about you, every second. What kinds of links do you click on? What videos do you watch all the way through? How quickly are you moving from one thing to the next? Where are you when you do these things? Who are you connecting with in person and online? What facial expressions do you make? How does your skin tone change in different situations? What were you doing just before you decided to buy something or not? Whether to vote or not?

All these measurements and many others have been matched up with similar readings about the lives of multitudes of other people through massive spying. Algorithms correlate what you do with what almost everyone else has done.

The algorithms don't really understand you, but there is power in numbers, especially in large numbers. If a lot of other people who like the foods you like were also more easily put off by pictures of a candidate portrayed in a pink border instead of a blue one, then you probably will be too, and no one needs to know why. Statistics are reliable, but only as idiot demons.

Are you sad, lonely, scared? Happy, confident? Getting your period? Experiencing a peak of class anxiety?

So-called advertisers can seize the moment when you are perfectly primed and then influence you with messages that have worked on other people who share traits and situations with you.

Now everyone who is on social media is getting individualized, continuously adjusted stimuli, without a break, so long as they use their smartphones. What might once have been called advertising must now be understood as continuous behavior modification on a titanic scale.

Please don't be insulted. Yes, I am suggesting that you might be turning, just a little, into a well-trained dog, or something less pleasant, like a lab rat or a robot. That you're being remote-controlled, just a little, by clients of big corporations. But if I'm right, then becoming aware of it might just free you, so give this a chance, okay?

A scientific movement called behaviorism arose before computers were invented. Behaviorists studied new, more methodical, sterile, and nerdy ways to train animals and humans.

One famous behaviorist was B. F. Skinner. He set up a methodical system, known as a Skinner box, in which caged animals got treats when they did something specific. There wasn't anyone petting or whispering to the animal, just a purely isolated mechanical action -- a new kind of training for modern times. Various behaviorists, who often gave off rather ominous vibes, applied this method to people. Behaviorist strategies often worked, which freaked everyone out, eventually leading to a bunch of creepy "mind control" sci-fi and horror movie scripts.

An unfortunate fact is that you can train someone using behaviorist techniques, *and the person doesn't even know it*. Until very recently, this rarely happened unless you signed up to be a test subject in an experiment in the basement of a university's psychology building. Then you'd go into a room and be tested while someone watched you through a one-way mirror. Even though you knew an experiment was going on, you didn't realize *how* you were being manipulated.



At least you gave consent to be manipulated in *some* way. (Well, not always. There were all kinds of cruel experiments performed on prisoners, on poor people, and especially on racial targets.)

This book argues in ten ways that what has become suddenly normal -- pervasive surveillance and constant, subtle manipulation -- is unethical, cruel, dangerous, and inhumane. Dangerous? Oh, yes, because who knows who's going to use that power, and for what?

## **THE MAD SCIENTIST TURNS OUT TO CARE ABOUT THE DOG IN THE CAGE**

You may have heard the mournful confessions from the founders of social media empires, which I prefer to call "behavior modification empires."

Here's Sean Parker, the first president of Facebook:

*We need to sort of give you a little dopamine hit every once in a while, because someone liked or commented on a photo or a post or whatever....It's a social-validation feedback loop... exactly the kind of thing that a hacker like myself would come up with, because you're exploiting a vulnerability in human psychology....The inventors, creators -- it's me, it's Mark [Zuckerberg], it's Kevin Systrom on Instagram, it's all of these people -- understood this consciously. And we did it anyway...it literally changes your relationship with society, with each other...It probably interferes with productivity in weird ways. God only knows what it's doing to our children's brains.*

Here's Chamath Palihapitiya, former vice president of user growth at Facebook:

*The short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops we've created are destroying how society works.... No civil discourse, no cooperation; misinformation, mistruth. And it's not an American problem -- this is not about Russian ads. This is a global problem... I feel tremendous guilt. I think we all knew in the back of our minds—even though we feigned this whole line of, like, there probably aren't any bad unintended consequences. I think in the back, deep, deep recesses of, we kind of knew something bad could happen...So we are in a really bad state of affairs right now, in my opinion. It is eroding the core foundation of how people behave by and between each other. And I don't have a good solution. My solution is I just don't use these tools anymore. I haven't for years.*

Better late than never. Plenty of critics like me have been warning that bad stuff was happening for a while now, but to hear this from the people who did the stuff is progress, a step forward.

For years, I had to endure quite painful criticism from friends in Silicon Valley because I was perceived as a traitor for criticizing what we were doing. Lately I have the opposite problem. I argue that Silicon Valley people are for the most part decent, and I ask that we not be villainized; I take a lot of fresh heat for that. Whether I've been too hard or too soft on my community is hard to know.

The more important question now is whether anyone's criticism will matter. It's undeniably out in the open that a bad technology is doing us harm, but will we -- will you, meaning you -- be able to resist and help steer the world to a better place?

Companies like Facebook, Google, and Twitter are finally trying to fix some of the massive problems they created, albeit in a piecemeal way. Is it because they are being pressured or because they feel that it's the right thing to do? Probably a little of both.

The companies are changing policies, hiring humans to monitor what's going on, and hiring data scientists to come up with algorithms to avoid the worst failings. Facebook's old mantra was "Move fast and break things," and now they're coming up with better mantras and picking up a few pieces from a shattered world and gluing them together.

This book will argue that the companies on their own can't do enough to glue the world back together. Because people in Silicon Valley are expressing regrets, you might think that now you just need to wait for us to fix the problem. That's not how things work. If you aren't part of the solution, there will be no solution.

This first argument will introduce a few key concepts behind the design of addictive and manipulative network services. Awareness is the first step to freedom.

## **Read the rest at home**

### **CARROT AND SHTICK**

Parker says Facebook intentionally got people addicted, while Palihapitiya is saying something about the negative effects on relationships and society. What is the connection between these two ideas?



The core process that allows social media to make money and that also does the damage to society is behavior modification. Behavior modification entails methodical techniques that change behavioral patterns in animals and people. It can be used to treat addictions, but it can also be used to create them. The damage to society comes because addiction makes people crazy. The addict gradually loses touch with the real world and real people. When many people are addicted to manipulative schemes, the world gets dark and crazy.

Addiction is a neurological process that we don't understand completely. The neurotransmitter dopamine plays a role in pleasure and is thought to be central to the mechanism of behavior change in response to getting rewards. That is why Parker brings it up.

Originally, food treats were the most common reward used in behaviorist experiments, though the practice goes back to ancient times. Every animal trainer uses them, slipping a little treat to a dog after it has performed a trick. Many parents of young children do it, too.

One of the first behaviorists, Ivan Pavlov, famously demonstrated that he didn't need to use real food. He would ring a bell when a dog was fed, and eventually the dog would salivate upon hearing the bell alone.

Using symbols instead of real rewards has become an essential trick in the behavior modification toolbox. For instance, a smartphone game like Candy Crush uses shiny images of candy instead of real candy to become addictive. Other addictive video games might use shiny images of coins or other treasure.

Addictive pleasure and reward patterns in the brain -- the "little dopamine hit" cited by Sean Parker -- are part of the basis of social media addiction, but not the whole story, because social media also uses punishment and negative reinforcement.

Various kinds of punishment have been used in behaviorist labs; electric shocks were popular for a while. But just as with rewards, it's not necessary for punishments to be real and physical. Sometimes experiments deny a subject points or tokens.

You are getting the equivalent of both treats *and* electric shocks when you use social media.

Most users of social media have experienced catfishing (which cats hate), senseless rejection, being belittled or ignored, outright sadism, or all of the above, and worse. Just as the carrot and stick work together, unpleasant feedback can play as much of a role in addiction and sneaky behavior modification as the pleasant kind.

## **THE ALLURE OF MYSTERY**

When Parker uses the phrase "every once in a while," he's probably referring to one of the curious phenomena that behaviorists discovered while studying both animals and people. If someone gets a reward -- whether it's positive social regard or a piece of candy -- whenever they do a particular thing, then they'll tend to do more of that thing. When people get a flattering response in exchange for posting something on social media, they get in the habit of posting more.

That sounds innocent enough, but it can be the first stage of an addiction that becomes a problem both for individuals and society. Even though Silicon Valley types have a sanitized name for this phase, "engagement," we fear it enough to keep our own children away from it. Many of the Silicon Valley kids I know attend Waldorf schools, which generally forbid electronics.

Back to the surprising phenomenon: it's not that positive and negative feedback work, but that somewhat random or unpredictable feedback can be more engaging than perfect feedback.

If you get a piece of candy immediately every time you say please as a child, you'll probably start saying please more often. But suppose once in a while the candy doesn't come. You might guess that you'd start saying please less often. After all, it's not generating the reward as reliably as it used to.

But sometimes the opposite thing happens. It's as if your brain, a born pattern finder, can't resist the challenge. "There must be some additional trick to it," murmurs your obsessive brain. You keep on pleasing, hoping that a deeper pattern will reveal itself, even though there's nothing but bottomless randomness.

Social media algorithms are usually "adaptive," which means they constantly make small changes to themselves in order to try to get better results; "better" in this case meaning more engaging and therefore more profitable. A little randomness is always present in this type of algorithm.



Neuroscientists naturally wonder whether a similar process is happening within the human brain. Our brains surely include adaptive processes; brains might be adapted to seek out surprises, because nature abhors a rut.

When an algorithm is feeding experiences to a person, it turns out that the randomness that lubricates algorithmic adaptation can also feed human addiction. The algorithm is trying to capture the perfect parameters for manipulating a brain, while the brain, in order to seek out deeper meaning, is changing in response to the algorithm's experiments; it's a cat-and-mouse game based on pure math. That process -- of becoming hooked on an elusive mirage -- is addiction. As the algorithm tries to escape a rut, the human mind becomes stuck in one.

The pioneers of the online exploitation of this intersection of math and the human brain were not the social media companies, but the creators of digital gambling machines like video poker, and then of online gambling sites.

## **HEAVEN AND HELL ARE MADE OF OTHER PEOPLE**

Social networks bring in another dimension of stimuli: social pressure.

People are keenly sensitive to social status, judgment, and competition. Unlike most animals, people are not only born absolutely helpless, but also remain so for years. We only survive by getting along with family members and others. Social concerns are not optional features of the human brain. They are primal.

The power of what other people think has proven to be intense enough to modify the behavior of subjects participating in famous studies like the Milgram Experiment and the Stanford Prison Experiment. Normal, noncriminal people were coerced into doing horrible things, such as torturing others, through no mechanism other than social pressure.

On social networks, the manipulation of social emotions has been the easiest way to generate rewards and punishments. That might change someday, if drones start dropping actual candy from the sky when you do what the algorithm wants, but for now it's all about feelings that can be evoked in you -- mostly, feelings regarding what other people think.

For instance, when we are afraid that we might not be considered cool, attractive, or high-status, we don't feel good. That fear is a profound emotion. It hurts.

Everybody suffers from social anxiety from time to time, and every child has encountered a bully who used social anxiety as a weapon of torture, probably because behaving like a bully lessened the chances that the bully might become a target. That's why people, even those who would normally be decent, tend to pile on to a victim of social anxiety torture. They're so afraid of the very real pain that social anxiety brings that they can lose sight of their better natures for a moment.

That's not to say that all social emotions are negative. We can also experience camaraderie, sympathy, respect, admiration, gratitude, hope, empathy, closeness, attraction, and a world of other positive feelings when we interact with other people. On the negative side, we might feel fear, hostility, anxiety, resentment, repulsion, jealousy, and a desire to ridicule.

There is no evil genius seated in a cubicle in a social media company performing calculations and deciding that making people feel bad is more "engaging" and therefore more profit-able than making them feel good. Or at least, I've never met or heard of such a person.

The prime directive to be engaging reinforces itself, and no one even notices that negative emotions are being amplified more than positive ones. Engagement is not meant to serve any particular purpose other than its own enhancement, and yet the result is an unnatural global amplification of the "easy" emotions, which happen to be the negative ones.

## **ADDICTION, MEET NETWORK EFFECT**

Addiction is a big part of the reason why so many of us accept being spied on and manipulated by our information technology, but it's not the only reason. Digital networks genuinely deliver value to us. They allow for great efficiencies and convenience. That's why so many of us worked so hard to make them possible.

Once you can use a pocket device to order rides and food and find out where to meet your friends right away, it's hard to go back. It's hard to remember that people with rare medical conditions used to have no way of finding other people in the same boat, so there was no one to talk to about unusual problems. What a blessing that it has become possible.



But the benefits of networks only appear when people use the same platform. If no one wanted to be an Uber driver, then your Uber app would accomplish exactly nothing. If no one wants to be on your dating app, then, once again, nothing.

The unfortunate result is that once an app starts to work, everyone is stuck with it. It's hard to quit a particular social network and go to a different one, because everyone you know is already on the first one. It's effectively impossible for everyone in a society to back up all their data, move simultaneously, and restore their memories at the same time.

Effects of this kind are called network effects or lock-ins.

They're hard to avoid on digital networks.

One of the main reasons to delete your social media accounts is that there isn't a real choice to move to different social media accounts. Quitting entirely is the only option for change. If you don't quit, you are not creating the space in which Silicon Valley can act to improve itself.

### **ADDICTION AND FREE WILL ARE OPPOSITES**

Addiction gradually turns you into a zombie. Zombies don't have free will. Once again, this result isn't total but statistical. You become more like a zombie, more of the time, than you otherwise would be.

There's no need to believe in some myth of perfect people who are completely free of addictions. They don't exist. You're not going to become perfect or perfectly free, no matter how many self-help books you read or how many addictive services you quit.

There's no such thing as perfectly free will. Our brains are constantly changing their ways to adapt to a changing environment. It's hard work, and brains get tired! Sometimes they take a break, zone out, and run on autopilot. But that's different from being driven by hidden manipulators.

We modify each other's behavior all the time, and that's a good thing. You'd have to be insensitive and uncaring to not change how you act around someone in response to how that person reacts. When mutual behavior modification gets good, it might be part of what we talk about when we talk about love. We don't have to think of free will as a supernatural intervention in our universe. Maybe free will exists when our adaptation to each other and the world has an exceptionally creative quality.

So the problem isn't behavior modification in itself. The problem is relentless, robotic, ultimately meaningless behavior modification in the service of unseen manipulators and uncaring algorithms.

Hypnosis might be therapeutic so long as you trust your hypnotist, but who would trust a hypnotist who is working for unknown third parties? Who? Apparently billions of people.

Consider the billions of dollars taken in by Facebook, Google, and the rest of the so-called digital advertising industry every month. The vast majority of that money comes from parties who are seeking to change your behavior, and who believe they are getting results. Many of these behavior changes are similar to the ones that television ads try to provoke, like getting you to buy a car or go to a café.

But, despite in some ways knowing more about you than you know about yourself, the companies don't always know the identities of the advertisers, the parties who are benefiting from manipulating you. Tech company lawyers have testified under oath that the companies couldn't have known when Russian intelligence services sought to disrupt elections or foment divisions to weaken societies, for instance.

I find that paranoid thinking is generally counterproductive. It disempowers you. But consider the present situation. We know that social media has been successfully deployed to disrupt societies, and we know that the price to do so is remarkably low. We know that relevant companies take in an astounding amount of money and that they don't always know who their customers are. Therefore, there are likely to be actors manipulating us—manipulating you—who have not been revealed.

To free yourself, to be more authentic, to be less addicted, to be less manipulated, to be less paranoid... for all these marvelous reasons, delete your accounts.