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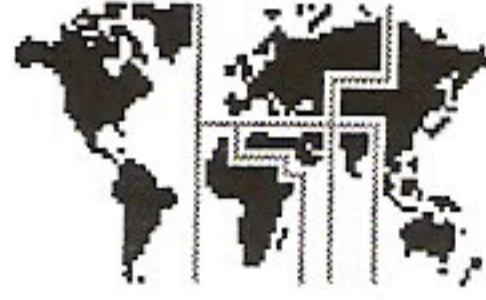
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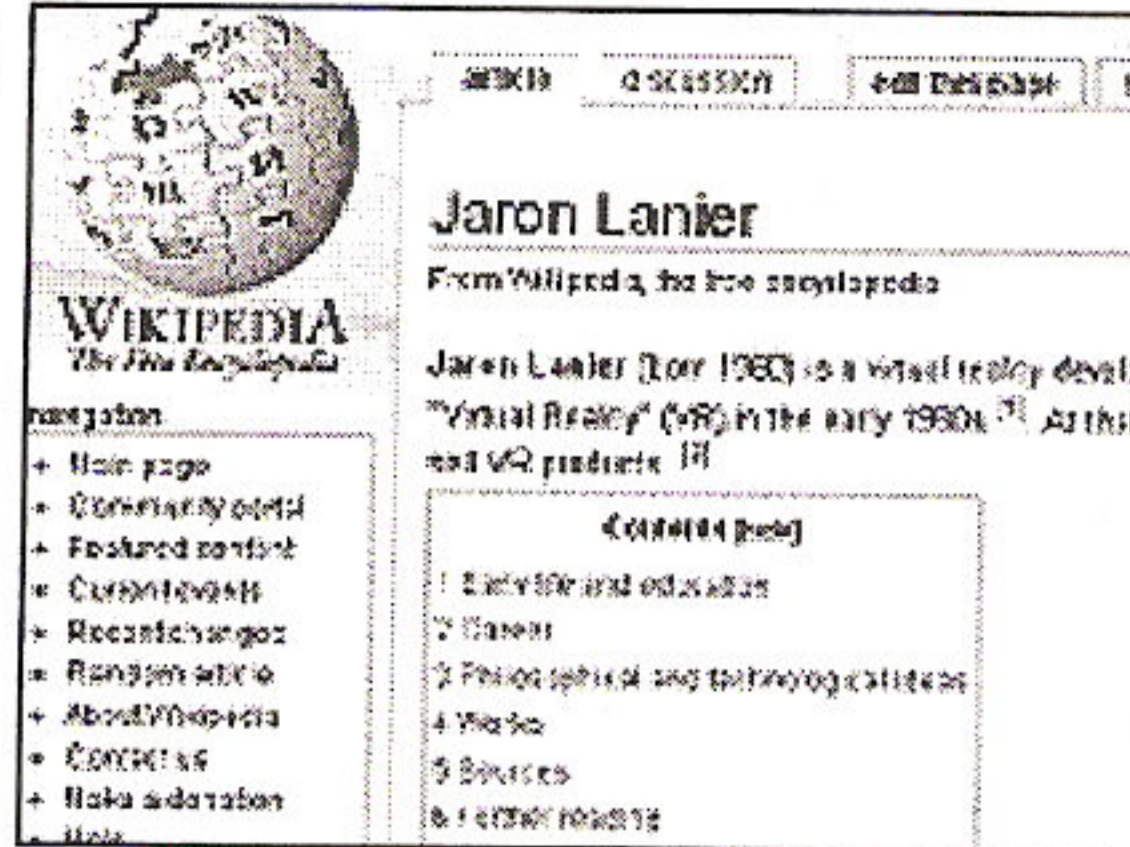
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Web 2.0's 'digital mobs' attacked

The latest phase of internet - web 2.0 - has been attacked by a leading author and digital pioneer for its "mob" mentality, describing it as "digital Maoism".

Jaron Lanier, who popularised the virtual reality concept in the early 1980s, said that in rush to forge a new age of collectivism, we risk losing individual identities and dumbing down our understanding of the world.



Lanier singled out Wikipedia's anonymous contributors for criticism

He told BBC World Service's Culture Shock that his main problem is that in places like the blogosphere or the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia, people no longer treat or respect each other as individuals.

"We have these designs on the internet where a whole bunch of people work together anonymously - a mob, in my opinion - in order to do something," he said.

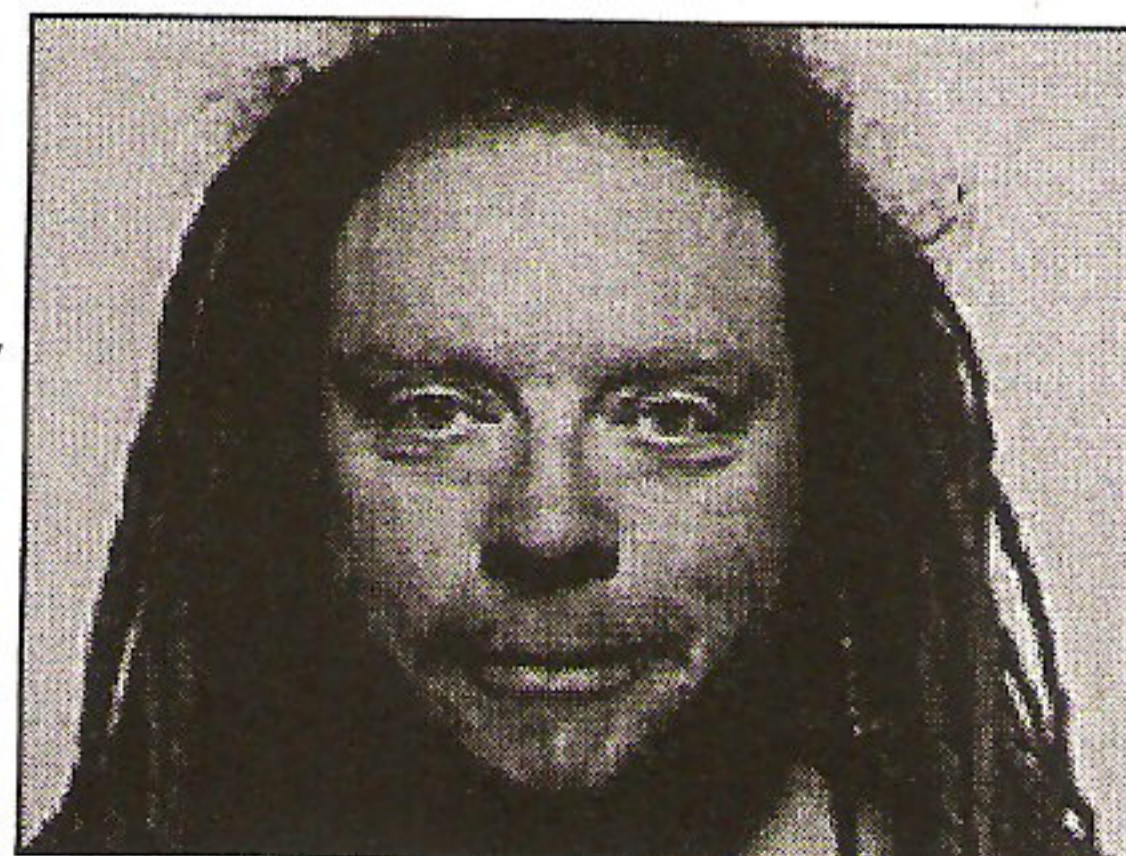
"They actually take on the emotional quality of a mob - they become mean, they tend to insult each other a lot more than they would if they knew who each other were. In my opinion, this is an example of a design that isn't so great."

Mass opinions

Lanier is among a small group leading a backlash against web 2.0 - the term coined to describe the latest internet era, in which collective ideas and participation take over from individual authorship.

Lanier singled out Wikipedia for particular criticism, saying that because those who participate do so anonymously, "you have no idea what knowledge any of them have".

"Essentially they lose themselves; they become a mob," he added.



Lanier led the introduction of the "virtual reality" idea in the 1980s



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He coined the term "digital Maoism" in a recent article, and explained that it was not meant entirely as an insult, but a reference to the notion that individual variations between people are negative and that "somehow, the masses of people will always be right".

And he said that there is currently an "avalanche" of new companies being funded by investors in Silicon Valley that are designed to harvest the wisdom of the collective.

He criticised in particular news aggregator sites, in which millions anonymously review a newspaper article, and a newspaper is created on the basis of the mass opinions of these people.

"The problem with that is that if you look at the result, you end up with trivial but amusing news stories as the headlines," he said.

"For instance, a college student winning an ice cream-eating contest and getting a horrible headache and having to go to the hospital.

"But some of the more important headlines, about politics or science, are either missing or obscure. This is a natural reaction, because of course people want to be amused, but I think the more valuable source of news brings them news that isn't always the best."

Web 3.0

But trend expert Lauren Parijs, director of the Flanders District of Creativity in Brussels, said that while Lanier's view an "anti-movement gaining momentum," it remains very small.

"It's natural - every new medium has its opposition," he added.

And he countered that while there is a sense of individuality being lost in some areas, other sites are attempting to counter this.

"You also see a lot of initiatives springing up on the web that actually combine the two things, letting people contribute but also meet up," he said.

"There is a networking initiative called E-Academy, and what they do is let people connect projects on the net that do the same thing, but also arrange for people to meet face to face within their community.

"So you see this blend taking place - and I think that's where web 3.0 will head towards."

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