

"When the network takes your job"

By Gil Smart

There's a first time for everything. Which is to say, my oldest son's baseball team is actually having a winning season.

And one of the small, enjoyable aspects of this is a service our head coach engaged, which -- among other things -- churns out recaps of each game, much like you might read in a newspaper. You keep score on an iPad and upload the data to the website, which uses it to automatically generate prose along the lines of: "The Blue downed their opponents Monday after pushing five runs across in an explosive third inning."

It's kind of cool to have your kid's team "covered" like the Phillies or Barnstormers. But it's also a bit disconcerting, particularly for someone in the news business. Given that computers can do this now, how long until your major media decides that actual sportswriters are unnecessary? Technology, after all, doesn't ask for sick days or try to expense a hot dog.

Think of the savings. Think of the jobs lost.

Not that this is novel stuff. It's called creative destruction; when cars replaced horses, buggy whip makers were out of work. And you could always count on new jobs replacing the ones that had been destroyed?

But in a new book titled "Who Owns the Future," computer science pioneer Jaron Lanier wonders if we can count on that anymore. He suggests that technology, in particular the Internet, is creating a new world where old industries, old norms are being destroyed -- with little to take their place.

Consider, he writes, the case of Kodak and Instagram. Kodak invented the digital camera; in 1996 the company had a market cap of \$28 billion and employed 140,000. In 2012, it went bankrupt.

That same year Instagram, the online photo-sharing service, was purchased by Facebook for \$1 billion. Total number of Instagram employees: 13.

Kodak could and did support entire communities. Those same communities may now utilize Instagram; in fact, their contributions may help make Instagram successful. But they get precious little out of it -- utility and entertainment, perhaps. But not sustenance.

That's the pattern, asserts Lanier. "Right now, most people are only gaining informal benefits from advances in technology, like free Internet services, while those who own the biggest computers are concentrating formal benefits to an unsustainable degree," he notes in a Q&A on Amazon.com.

The creative class -- think writers, musicians, photographers -- are the canaries in the digital coal mine, he believes. But everyone else will catch up. Where vehicles can drive themselves, who needs taxi drivers or truckers? In March, The Atlantic featured a cover story about how technology was on the verge of disrupting the health care industry: "Are doctors necessary?" the piece asked. "Just how far might the automation of medicine go?"

Technology may be in the process of making work itself obsolete.

And consider how society changes if that's the case. It narrows the distribution of wealth -- as Lanier says, you either own the biggest, most powerful computers, or you don't. And without a broad distribution of wealth, the middle class as we've known it can't exist.

But markets themselves require this: "Markets can only function if there are customers, and customers can only come if there's a middle hump," a strong middle class, said Lanier in an

interview with Salon.com last week.

"Democracy is destabilized if there isn't a broad distribution of wealth."

Lanier's suggestion to combat all this is simple yet revolutionary: micropayments for those who contribute to social networks -- you, who upload content to Facebook or Instagram. For users are the ones who make those networks successful. So why shouldn't those content creators be compensated?

I'm guessing the likes of Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg wouldn't be real keen on that idea.

None of this, by the way, is a call to Luddism. Rather, it's to say that technology may enrich our lives in a metaphorical sense, but not literally. Economists tout the need for education -- borrow six figures to finance your education because factory floor jobs are being replaced by computers, so you need to be the guy who programs the computer.

Good idea. Except -- what happens on the day the computers learn to program themselves?