

Katelynn Richardson

Professor Costello

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One nation, under Google: How data achieved deity status

Man has always strived to seize control of life. In meeting this goal, the modern man has taken many great strides; he's thrown off the shackles of myth and legend, of absolute moral law, of values endowed from above; he has evolved past such superstition, and now, he is free to chart his own course. The only problem is, humans aren't particularly good at doing so. Despite sincere efforts to change, wars, violence, abusive governments, lack of justice, and other age-old problems persist. The version of humanism that rose to popularity in the 19th and 20th centuries, which called for an abandonment of theism and acceptance of the idea that people are responsible for their own paths, has neither eliminated nor subdued the flaws in human nature. People still struggle today in the same ways they have for thousands of years.

It would seem humanity's cause is hopeless, if it were not for a new philosophy on the rise: data-ism. The term was first coined by historian Yuval Noah Harari to describe the push towards technology and algorithms that govern our lives. He theorizes of a coming day where instead of listening to God or yourself when you have a problem, you will "listen to Amazon, listen to Google; they know how you feel, they know you better than you know yourself, and they can make better decisions on your behalf than you can (Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, 25:50)." Harari describes a reality where man can emerge triumphant only by pairing with technology to ascend to a higher state, one where algorithms take the lead. These

predictions should raise red flags. First, because they significantly displace the source of mankind's authority. Second, because it is questionable whether this new method can fix what it aims to fix. While developers of new technologies like AI and powerful algorithms make grandiose claims that these inventions will save humanity from a self-induced demise, the most likely outcome is one that diminishes the qualities that truly make us human, providing only a synthetic solution that doesn't get to the root of the problem.

An all-knowing algorithm sounds like something of a far-off, dystopian future, but in a sense, it already exists. Just look at how Google and Facebook currently serve ads to their users online. Using a person's profile, past activity, and search history information, they can pinpoint the age, demographics, interests, friends, location, and daily routines of an individual--and then choose ads to match that information. Even though this technology is only in its infancy, it is already extremely powerful. Google's entire business model is based on data collection and subsequent use of that data to benefit advertisers. With 86 percent of their profits coming from Google Ads, they stand to gain significant money by continuing to learn about their users, and they have the means to do so (Newman). The biggest webpage traffic and user behavior system is Google Analytics, which is used by three-quarters of 100,000 most visited websites (Schmidt 17). Google AdWords, the biggest tool for display ads online, can reach more than 90 percent of internet users (Schmidt 18). In research conducted under Professor Douglas C. Schmidt at Vanderbilt University, it was found that Google not only collects internet usage data, but also other personal data of Android users. For these phones, Google can access items purchased, music, time off and on the phone, 3rd party apps, and receive this data constantly throughout the day (Schmidt 2-5).

While sometimes eerie in its ability to predict what you want, targeted advertising still seems to be a far cry from an algorithm that seeks to take control of your life. But other uses of similar technology are not. For example, take the Chinese social credit system. This system gives each citizen a social ranking, calculating scores based on hard numbers like bill payment history and on arbitrary measurements like personal relationships and purchasing habits, and punishes low scores by denying individuals anything from airplane flights to housing. Though it isn't yet mandatory, at least 6.15 million people have already been banned from flights based on the system. It sounds like an idea torn straight from the pages of a futuristic novel, like *Big Brother* in George Orwell's *1984*, but today it is a reality for many citizens (Botsman).

The Chinese system highlights the risk of such systems being used as a means for oppression, but to an extent, this also shows how such technologies can become de-humanizing. The government claims the system is used with the intent of creating a culture of trust and sincerity, but it will likely do the opposite. Relegating human interaction to a number means removing the emotion, removing the connection, and reducing each person to a data point. It makes relationships superficial, changing the purpose from a genuine connection to gaining a better score. In a world like this, people not only lose touch with each other but also with themselves. By striving to meet the requirements of a contrived social structure, they lose their individuality.

Yet, such changes in the social structure are not an unintended consequence. They are exactly what data-ism aims to do--eliminate risk by eliminating choice. People might hurt each other or lie, so the algorithm will hold them accountable through tracking and ranking. People are indecisive and at risk for mistakes, so the algorithm will monitor past decisions and serve

them ads that tell them what they want. People might start believing false ideas, so the algorithm will root out anything that causes a person to question. The world ruled by technology is one where people not only lose autonomy, but also the richness that comes from life experiences. They are in danger of succumbing to the belief that life has no meaning outside the digital world. This, too, is something we can see today, with the “pics or it didn’t happen” mentality found on social media. People feel if they don’t post, the moment was worthless. Social media interaction acts as a way to legitimize their experience while removing emotion and true connection. In this sense, people are already ‘plugged in’ and integrated with technology. Phones have become an extension of a person. People value the feedback of numbers--likes, comments, reposts--more than the experience itself. This is a mild example. As the data becomes more influential, the risk of losing true meaning will only worsen, as the motivation for building these advanced technologies has been flawed from the onset.

Algorithms are not capable of non-analytical thinking. They don’t care about the process, only the product. Promoters of data-ism do not even see this as a problem, because to them, it is just the next step in humanity’s evolution. Yuval Noah Harari argues in his book that:

If some humanist starts adulating the sacredness of human experience, Dataists would dismiss such sentimental humbug. ‘The experience you praise is just an outdated biochemical algorithm. In the African savannah 70,000 years ago, that algorithm was state-of-the-art. Even in the twentieth century it was vital for the army and for the economy. But soon we will have much better algorithms. (Harari)

If this is taken as truth, a big question remains. What would humanity become without a need for experiences or feelings? CEOs of major tech companies today envision a future similar

to Harari's. As we submit to the rule of data, we can live happier conflict-free lives without the burden of decisions. Elon Musk's company Neuralink is currently developing a brain implant device that can expand the capacity of the mind. The initial target market will be those with neurological disorders, but Musk hopes to eventually expand these devices to the general population. In a debate with Jack Ma, the co-founder of the Chinese technology company Alibaba, Musk explained that he thinks of humanity as a, "a biological boot loader for digital super intelligence (Harris)."

On one level, it is easy to see how having a computer in your brain could be appealing. It is extremely convenient, would make learning painless, and would simplify practically every aspect of life. But that is part of the problem. It's too results oriented. Computers are built for a task; humans are built to live. As people, we value the road it takes to get to a destination. When Elon Musk says he wants to download content into brains because education right now is "extremely slow", he misses the point (Harris). The knowledge will be there, but people will never get to exercise or strengthen their creativity. They will no longer build character by going through a difficult process or feel accomplished after working hard.

Technology can only make partial solutions, all the while destroying the reasons for making them. The mind is not an algorithm. The true implication of these new devices is treating it as one, and in turn, killing our own consciousness. Once we give up our minds, our choices, our emotions-- there is no limit to how far this can go. People will become cyborgs, slaves to a system they had no say in. If we really are just a "biological boot loader", then what's the point of living? The sum of these ideas is an entirely new world, a new species, a new way of life. It's placing faith not in God, or even in ourselves, but in technology. Whether that faith in the

authority of our own inventions is justified, humanity will soon have to decide. We're not yet at the point of complete technological rule. The predictions of a future this bleak may never come to fruition, but they should at least be sobering calls to action. Going forward, man must realize that just as he has thus far failed at resolving the biggest problems, data will too. Trying to fix faults by removing the elements that make humans unique is not a solution. Humanity must consider the possibility that there is a reason for past systems of living, of morality, and of belief that runs deeper than an algorithm, and changing these could contort the human experience beyond recognition.

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