

Harari & *The Social Dilemma*

Paper Prompt

Course: ENC1939: Unfollow—Culture & Identity on the Internet
Instructor: Nico Cassanetti

Formatting Requirements: double spaced, Garamond or TNR font, MLA formatted and minimum 4 full pages with a complete and correct Works Cited page.

Total Points Possible: 100

Rough Draft Due Date: TBA

Peer Review Due Date: TBA

Final Draft Due Date: TBA

In his essay, [“Big Data, Google and the End of Free Will”](#), historian and best-selling author Yuval Noah Harari explores the rise of the digital era and challenges us to consider the notion that “Data-ism” is replacing Humanism as the dominant belief system of our time. In the Data-ist society, human beings are constituted as a series of datapoints based on our searches, our purchases, and what we read—and the aggregation of our data could have the potential to offer us, as a society, a happier and healthier existence.

However, the promise of convenience and self-betterment comes as a cost. Harari states that, “once Big Data systems know me better than I know myself, authority will shift from humans to algorithms.” This notion poses some big ethical concerns—some of which we saw play out in the Netflix documentary, *The Social Dilemma*, which focuses on how big social media companies manipulate users by using algorithms that encourage addiction to their platforms. One of the main ways they do this is through the dramatizations in which a fictional character named Ben is given “a team of people” (aka The Algorithms) operating behind the scenes to maximize his interaction with a social media platform. But while the documentary educates viewers about the problems social networks present to both our privacy and agency, it falls short of providing a tangible solution and instead leaves us with more questions:

-Who will control these algorithms and look after their independence and trustworthiness as authority shifts?

-Is our data safer in the hands of Google, Apple and Facebook or wielded by the unaccountable political forces?

If our society abandons Humanist ideals like individuality and free will by blindly trusting algorithms to make the “right” choice, are we sacrificing our ability to learn and evolve from making the “wrong” choice? And, for better or worse, are the very things that makes us “human”—romance, curiosity, courage, creativity—endangered by this newfound reliance on machine-made decision making?

For this essay, construct, pose and support an argument on how machine-learning A.I.’s such as algorithms shape our culture and identity, and the moral implications of Dataism on our humanity. You should consider some of the philosophical and ethical questions brought up in both Harari (Humanism vs. Dataism) and *The Social Dilemma*. **You are free to limit your scope to a specific demographic** (ie. instead of talking about the ethical/moral implications of “Big Data” and algorithms for all mankind, you could focus on just U.S. citizens, Gen Z, women, POC, etc.) **-or- you could talk about the potential ethical implications for a specific field like medicine or education** (For example: if all our biodata was freely aggregated medical science could make huge

progress. However, that free flow of data might also lead to manipulation and abuse of power by those who control the data that may be unavoidable).

You are welcome to consider any of the questions above OR those in **Humanism vs. Dataism** lesson or **The Social Dilemma** lesson while brainstorming your argument, but don't stray too far from the main ideas of how machine-based decision-making effects our humanity (I promise those who are interested in data mining, "fake news" and other more topical issues will be able to do so in later essays). You should also consider the rhetorical strategies in **Essay Structures & Types of Essays** lesson and keep the four major rhetorical appeals in mind as you begin drafting your essay.

In addition to the aforementioned formatting criteria at the beginning of this prompt, **YOU MUST USE at least TWO direct citations from Harari's essay and TWO citations from *The Social Dilemma* along with detailed observations and analyses to discuss your argument. Outside CREDIBLE sources permitted but for this essay, however I prefer you stick to the two assigned pieces as your primary sources for this essay.

MORE QUESTIONS/LINES OF INQUIRY TO CONSIDER:

- Can Humanism and Dataism co-exist? How?
- Is it realistic to trust algorithms when we already suffer from so much misinformation and disinformation online?
- How might Harari's analysis of technology's impact on free will help explain the negative effects of technology that we say illustrated in *The Social Dilemma* (depression, addiction, etc.)?
- **Know Thyself:** Harari says at the end of his essay that the only way "to stay beyond the reach of the algorithms" is to adhere to the oldest advice in the book: "know thyself", but for younger generations growing up on the internet, is it possible to know yourself completely without acknowledging the part of you that you project online? Is that version of yourself a good representation of your physical self?

Criteria for Evaluation (see Grading Rubric on Canvas for more info):

- **Argument:** Argument directly and fully answers the prompt; is clearly stated early in the paper; is original, compelling and logical, avoiding absolute claims
- **Evidence:** Appropriate amount of relevant, accurate, and justifiably interpreted quotation. Quotations are thoroughly introduced, explained, analyzed, and connected to argument. Possible counterarguments are considered.
- **Organization:** Paragraphs maintain argumentative focus, exclude extraneous information, appear in a logical order, and transition smoothly. Introduction sets forth argument and goals of essay. Conclusion opens up avenues for future research.
- **Audience:** Consistent, academic tone. Appropriate amount of contextual information, anticipating audience questions. Addresses significant issues and makes them important to audience.
- **Grammar and Format:** Errors in grammar, spelling, and usage limited or non-existent. Correct MLA format, including proper quotation citation.