

## Consensus

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Volume 40  
Issue 1 *Student Paper Showcase*

Article 3


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5-25-2019

# Social Media and Othering: Philosophy, Algorithms, and the Essence of Being Human

Mark Ehlebracht

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### Recommended Citation

Ehlebracht, Mark (2019) "Social Media and Othering: Philosophy, Algorithms, and the Essence of Being Human," *Consensus*: Vol. 40 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol40/iss1/3>

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# Social Media and Othering: Philosophy, Algorithms, and the Essence of Being Human

Mark Ehlebracht<sup>1</sup>

Social media platforms and large technology companies are fundamentally shifting the way people and organizations communicate and interact with each other. When examined through the lens of othering, the shifts become exceptionally apparent and can drive one to contemplate if a fundamental rethinking of modern technology and its uses is required. This paper will attempt to examine the idea of othering, the philosophical foundations of technology as they relate to social media, the interplay between individual libertarianism and utopian collectivism in the context of othering, othering via algorithms, and the interplay between marginalization and identity through social media.

## Othering: Definition and Identity

One author defines and describes othering as “[...] any action by which an individual or group becomes mentally classified in somebody’s mind as ‘not one of us’. Rather than [...] remembering that every person is a complex bundle of emotions, ideas, motivations, reflexes, priorities, and many other subtle aspects, it’s sometimes easier to dismiss them as being in some way less human [...]”<sup>2</sup> Othering can also be defined as “[...] a set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities.”<sup>3</sup> Some of these identities may include religion, sex, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and skin colour and are contextual.<sup>4</sup> While some may be eager to explain this phenomena away, attributing it to a tribal past where group cohesion was important, as was the demarcation between friend and enemy,<sup>5</sup> with the idea being those who were friends would look out for each other. “There’s a powerful evolutionary drive to identify in some way with a tribe of people who are ‘like you’, and to feel a stronger connection and allegiance to them than to anyone else. Today, this tribe might not be a local and insular community you grew up with, but can be, for instance, fellow supporters of a sports team or political party.”<sup>6</sup> Adding to this understanding, the author Simon Synek, explores and interprets this “tribal-ness” as a desire to belong, or fit in, with a group.

The most basic human desire is to feel like you belong. Fitting in is important. When we see that someone supports the same team we do, we feel a sort of bond, for no other reason than that we perceive that we share something in common with them.

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<sup>1</sup> PhD in Human Relationships – TH648Z: Other Ways of Reading, Interpreting, and Being, Fall 2018.

<sup>2</sup> “Othering 101: What is Othering,” Blog, December 28, 2011, accessed December 9, 2018, <https://therearenoothers.wordpress.com/2011/12/28/othering-101-what-is-othering/>

<sup>3</sup> John A. Powell and Stephen Menendian, “The Problem of Othering: Towards Inclusiveness and Belonging,” accessed December 2, 2018, <http://www.otheringandbelonging.org/the-problem-of-othering>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Our desire to feel like we belong is so strong that we seek it out. [...] That sense of belonging is important to us because with a sense of belonging, with a sense that we are surrounded by people who understand us and see the world as we see it, we feel more comfortable. We feel safer.<sup>7</sup>

These feelings, with their evolutionary underpinnings, rightly or wrongly, begin to determine and articulate boundaries that enable us to demarcate who is in and who is out, who is “us” and who is “other.” But what, exactly, makes us who we are? How do you know you are you? How does one know “they” are “they?” From where does your identity come?

## Social Media: Philosophical Foundations

Philosophers have struggled with these questions for centuries. Descartes famously said “I think, therefore I am.”<sup>8</sup> How, then, does the essence of who we are, as defined by Descartes, mesh or co-exist in a world where we are “informed by Google and entertained by Apple; we socialize on Facebook and shop on Amazon.”<sup>9</sup> A challenge, then, is birthed and asks how can we make our way through life when social media can heighten or dull our experience of the world and our making our way through it? Might social media be the new Hermes or interpreter of what is going on in the world?

The philosopher Martin Heidegger was interested in *what of the being is being*,<sup>10</sup> and what it means to be human. Heidegger’s writings may be helpful and timely as we contemplate the role and place of social media in our lives. In essence, the question of how we understand our humanity becomes integral when the traditional orientation posts of time and death, which alert us to our being, and more to the marvel of our being, are obscured.<sup>11</sup> The author Franklin Foer, through his book *World Without Mind: The Existential Threat of Big Technology*, might well fuse some of his thinking into Heidegger’s as he ponders the breaking point of humanity, or the point at which “our nature is no longer really human.”<sup>12</sup> What is that threshold and what are the costs?<sup>13</sup> Is it monopoly, conformism, other companies’ machines?<sup>14</sup> While social media platforms have connected us in ways that we could not have imagined, they have also fundamentally shifted the way we interact with one another and how we understand or enact autonomy. How do we steer our own course and protect culture, democracy, the individual, and ourselves?<sup>15</sup> Have we, as Foer argues, “deluded ourselves into caring more deeply about efficiency than about the things that last?”<sup>16</sup> We are speaking, here, of identity.

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<sup>7</sup> Simon Sinek, “Fitting In: Simon Sinek,” AskMen (October 12, 2010), 1, accessed January 11, 2018, [http://www.askmen.com/money/career\\_400/409\\_fitting-in-simon-sinek.html](http://www.askmen.com/money/career_400/409_fitting-in-simon-sinek.html). Previously referenced in TH765A, June 9, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> René Descartes, *Discourse on Method* (Broadview Press, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Business Radio, “A ‘World Without Mind’: Big Tech’s Dangerous Influence.”

<sup>10</sup> Explored in TH664X: *The Art and Science of Interpretation*, with Dr. Allen Jorgenson, Martin Luther University College, Winter Term, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Franklin Foer, *The Existential Threat of Big Tech*, 231.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

## Identity Manipulation

Emilie Whitaker, in her article “Social Media—Narrating and Othering Our Selves, cites the work of Adriana Cavarero who offers the “[...] argument that the stories we tell about ourselves are touchstones in our creation of personal identity and self-understanding. Yet, we are always in the middle. Thus, our own tales are not enough. We are reliant on the narratives others have told us about ourselves in order to understand and create ourselves as we move onwards.”<sup>17</sup>

In [the author Franklin] Foer’s telling, Google wants to hijack human evolution by stockpiling all information and using it to build an artificial mind. Facebook wants to automate away our capacity to think and choose in order to forge a more harmonious social whole. Amazon wants to make knowledge worthless and to kill the traditions that nurture creativity, culture and complex thought.<sup>18</sup>

This raises two serious concerns, namely, what does it mean to be human and what is the role of subjugating knowledge(s),<sup>19</sup> specifically through social media platforms, in othering? When asked what it means to be human, there is a gravitation to words such as spontaneity and individuality which are moral autonomous agents that point us towards wrestling with the naming of the intersection of mind, body, self, identity, belief, desire, and free will;<sup>20</sup> this is, essentially, what it means to be a person – personhood. If this is the case, that the essence of who we are - our personhood – is something that can be understood and/or manipulated through technology and its social media platforms, can our personhood become a subjugated personhood? The philosophers Rousseau and Kant explore the idea of a normative aspect to personhood.

This would mean that specifying the nature of personhood would not simply be describing how we are in fact, but rather describing how we ought to be. According to this tradition, a person ought to be an ‘autonomous being.’ What constitutes an autonomous being is the subject of much debate. According to one recent commentator, ‘at a minimum, the agents must be able to act for reasons, reflecting on facts and interests across time’ (Hill 2000, 241). We can think of an autonomous being as one who is able to determine the ‘shape’ of their life through reasoned free choices.<sup>21</sup>

What is it to be a person? “What is necessary, and what suffices, for something to count as a person, as opposed to a nonperson? What have people got that nonpeople [*sic*] haven’t got?

<sup>17</sup> Adriana Cavarero in Emilie Whitaker, “Social Media—Narrating and Othering Our Selves,” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 3, no. 7 (2014): 55-61, 55.

<sup>18</sup> Ben Tarnoff, “World Without Mind by Franklin Foer Review – the Turn against Big Tech.”

<sup>19</sup> I was first introduced to this terminology and concept through Margaret Kovach’s *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations and Contexts*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010 and the work of Michel Foucault as discussed in Mary Philip’s TH648Z: Other Ways of Reading, Interpreting, and Being, Martin Luther University College, Fall Term, 2018.

<sup>20</sup> “Department of Philosophy,” *Philosophy of Human Nature* | Department of Philosophy, accessed April 10, 2018, <http://departments2.shc.edu/philosophy/philosophy-human-nature>.

<sup>21</sup> David Matravers, “Philosophy: The Nature of Persons,” OpenLearn, accessed April 10, 2018, <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/culture/philosophy/philosophy-the-nature-persons/content-section-1>.

More specifically, we can ask at what point in one's development from a fertilized egg there comes to be a person?"<sup>22</sup> Eric Olson writes that, ideally, personhood "...would be a definition of the word person, taking the form 'Necessarily, x is a person at time t if and only if ... x ... t ...', with the blanks appropriately filled in. The most common answer is that to be a person at a time is to have certain special mental properties then [...]."<sup>23</sup>

To be sure, our identities are layered, and

range from the intimately personal and unique to the broadly collective and binding. Identities are a way of making sense of who we are and as such may be the result of a very individual process of reflection and choice and an empowering expression of beliefs, tastes and values. However, identities are also socially constructed and determined by wider social, cultural, political and economic contexts. They may be reinterpreted or even imposed upon certain groups or individuals by others, often as a result of inequalities of power and authority. In this case identities may be divisive and repressive or even rebellious and subversive.<sup>24</sup>

Whether from a psychological, biological, narrative, or anthropological viewpoint, identity can be an unclear and complicated concept. Depending on the context, for example, it is reasonable to suggest that the answer to the question "Who are you?" can be answered in a variety of ways (i.e. I am a parent, a pastor, a partner, a child, a student, a tax payer). John Locke argues that personal identity is a matter of psychological continuity with connections between such things as desires, beliefs, memories, and character traits.<sup>25</sup> On a philosophical level, this view can become challenging when one contemplates that it may be possible, then, for a future person (i.e. when person x evolves out of an experience to become person y) to be "psychologically continuous with a presently existing person."<sup>26</sup> If the properties that are essential rather than contingent to someone's being are changed, is it still the same person? (i.e. are you the same person before and after you lose a finger, or suffer from advanced Alzheimer's disease).<sup>27</sup> What determines which past or future being is you?<sup>28</sup> "Suppose you point to an old class photograph and say, 'That's me.' What makes you that one, rather than one of the others? What is it about the way she relates then to you as you are now that makes her you? [...] What makes it the case that anyone at all who existed back then is you?"<sup>29</sup> These questions lead to what is referred to as persistence conditions. After one's death, for example, could we continue to exist? The biological answer would be no while a philosophical answer might be yes. If there was someone who could resemble you in certain ways, "how would that being have to relate to you as you are now in order to *be* you rather

<sup>22</sup> Eric T. Olson, "Personal Identity," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, July 09, 2015, 2, accessed March 24, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-personal/>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Rebecca Kay, "Identity and Marginality," *eSharp 6:1 (Autumn 2005)*, 1, [https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media\\_41175\\_en.pdf](https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_41175_en.pdf), referenced in TH648Z.

<sup>25</sup> Carsten Korfmacher, "Personal Identity," *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ISSN 2161-0002, accessed March 24, 2019, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/person-i/>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> James Fearon, *What is Identity (As We Now Use the Word)?*, unpublished manuscript, November 3, 1999, Stanford University, Department of Political Science, 12, <https://web.stanford.edu/group/fearon-research/cgi-bin/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/What-is-Identity-as-we-now-use-the-word-.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> Eric T. Olson, "Personal Identity," 2.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 2.

than someone else?”<sup>30</sup> The answer will depend on how one answers the persistence question, namely, “what does it take for a person to persist from one time to another – to continue existing rather than ceasing to exist?”<sup>31</sup> Exploring the persistence question often reveals a criterion of personal identity. “A criterion is a set of non-trivial necessary and sufficient conditions that determines, insofar as that is possible, whether distinct temporally indexed person-stages are stages of one and the same continuant person.”<sup>32</sup>

The philosopher Martin Heidegger shifted the dialogue regarding knowledge and identity by considering issues surrounding ontology (what it means to be a human being) and moving debate beyond epistemology.<sup>33</sup> The Cartesian notions of the self view the self as subject, “[...] an uninvolved self passively contemplating the external world of things via representations that are held in the mind. This self *possesses* a body and, by extension, traits or attributes such as anxiety or self-esteem. The self is always seen as subject and the world or environment as object.”<sup>34</sup> This has implications for meaning making since meaning would then be grounded in the actions of subjects.<sup>35</sup> Heideggerian phenomenologists argue that traditional science constrains understanding of human agency, limits one’s imaginative ability to generate questions and limits answers to those questions.<sup>36</sup>

Much of this is rooted in relationship, specifically the relation of person to world, which is complicated by the emergence of a new “tethered self, permanently connected”<sup>37</sup> to world. “World is the meaningful set of relationships, practices, and language that we have by virtue of being born into a culture;”<sup>38</sup> this, for Heidegger, makes world a priori. Heidegger describes that world

comes not afterward but beforehand, in the strict sense of the word. Before hand: that which is unveiled and understood already in advance in every existent Dasein before any apprehending of this or that being. The world as already unveiled in advance is such that we do not in fact specifically occupy ourselves with it, or apprehend it, but instead it is so self-evident, so much a matter of course, that we are completely oblivious to it.<sup>39</sup>

The tension between the self as constituted by the world and the Cartesian understanding of self as possession is palpable; personal identity, notes Hoy (1986), “is not a matter of ownership.”<sup>40</sup> “It is thought that by getting clear about values, purposes, and choices, the radically free self can gain enlightened control over his or her life”<sup>41</sup> and hence, “causes us to

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Carsten Korfmacher, “Personal Identity,” 3.

<sup>33</sup> Patricia Benner, *Interpretive Phenomenology: Embodiment, Caring, and Ethics in Health and Illness*, SAGE Publications, 1994, 44.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>37</sup> Tim Hutchings, Review of Network Theology, 9.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>39</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 165.

<sup>40</sup> Via Patricia Benner, *Interpretive Phenomenology*, 48.

<sup>41</sup> Patricia Benner, *Interpretive Phenomenology*, 48.

privilege detached theorizing over practical activity.”<sup>42</sup> Heidegger argues that the detached, reflective mode of knowing the world exemplified by Descartes is dependent on a priori existence of world in which the meaning given in our language and culture is what makes things show up for us at all.”<sup>43</sup>

## Social Control

The French philosopher Michel Foucault developed theories that explored the relationship between power and knowledge and, consequently, how these were used as forms of social control. “What authorities claim as ‘scientific knowledge’ is really just means of social control. Foucault shows how, for instance, in the eighteenth century ‘madness’ was used to categorise and stigmatise not just the mentally ill but the poor, the sick, the homeless and, indeed, anyone whose expressions of individuality were unwelcome.”<sup>44</sup> Foucault writes:

The community acquired an ethical power of segregation, which permitted it to eject, as into another world, all forms of social uselessness. It was in this *other world*, encircled by the sacred powers of labor, that madness would assume the status we know attribute to it. If there is, in classical madness, something which refers elsewhere, and to *other things*, it is no longer because the madman comes from the world of the irrational and bears its stigmata; rather, it is because he crosses the frontiers of bourgeois order of his own accord, and alienates himself outside the sacred limits of its ethic.

In fact, the relation between the practice of confinement and the insistence on work is not defined by economic conditions; far from it. A moral perception sustains and animates it. When the Board of Trade published its report on the poor in which it proposed the means “to rend them useful to the public,” it was made quite clear that the origin of poverty was neither scarcity of commodities nor unemployment, but “the weakening of discipline and the relaxation of morals.”<sup>45</sup>

With knowledge comes power, and knowledges can become subjugated knowledges.<sup>46</sup> “The ancient term for wisdom, *sapientia*, comes from *sapere*, to taste. *Sapere-savourer-savior*. This epistemological line speaks legions, reminding us that our deepest knowing is tasting and touching. [...] Ordinary language knows this, and philosophical language is no more than an extrapolation of what we already know ‘deep down.’”<sup>47</sup> The broader, and perhaps more troubling, question is how does humanity use the knowledge that it has? Further, is social media, for example, used to raise awareness of something while being sensitive to ‘the other’ or is it, ultimately, about own egos or meeting our own needs? Does it give power to the “tweeter?” Do we use someone’s marginalized status to boost our own identities via various social media platforms? In the quest to determine our individual and collective identities, do

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Philip Stokes, *Philosophy: 100 Essential Thinkers*. Kettering: Index Books, 2004, 187.

<sup>45</sup> Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Routledge, 2002), 54.

<sup>46</sup> This term is from Michel Foucault as discussed in Mary Philip’s TH648Z: Other Ways of Reading, Interpreting, and Being, Martin Luther University College, Fall Term, 2018.

<sup>47</sup> Richard Kearney, *Carnal Hermeneutics*, 16.

we consciously or unconsciously, through a liturgy of compare and contrast, thrust an identity on another (creating an “other”) in an effort to understand ourselves? To be sure, our identities are layered and

range from the intimately personal and unique to the broadly collective and binding. Identities are a way of making sense of who we are and as such may be the result of a very individual process of reflection and choice and an empowering expression of beliefs, tastes and values. However, identities are also socially constructed and determined by wider social, cultural, political and economic contexts. They may be reinterpreted or even imposed upon certain groups or individuals by others, often as a result of inequalities of power and authority. In this case identities may be divisive and repressive or even rebellious and subversive.<sup>48</sup>

## Subjugation

Combing through the Twitter feed of various church bodies, an interesting picture emerges. Here is a small, more benign sampling from within my own church body, the Eastern Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, offered for illustrative purposes:

**Katherine Gohm** @katherinegohm 3 May 2016

Redeemer, Trinity, St. Andrew's folks readying apartment for our Syrian family. Here we go! #myelcic #ESynod

**Miranda Gray** @mirgray 5 Mar 2016

The crowd begins to gather at St Peters #myELCIC for the #Ottawa Syrian #Refugee Welcome Potluck dinner.

**Elina Salonen** @Pastori\_Elina 27 Nov 2018

StPeter's #MittenTree is already laden! All these & more will be distributed through #LinkESL on Albert St, #Centre507 & #RestoringHopeMinistries' emergency shelter. The gift of giving creates joy in our hearts! #ESyondELCIC #myELCIC #Ottawa

**Christie Morrow-Wolfe** @revmorrow\_wolfe Feb 28 2018

#PinkShirtDay ... Lauren and I taking a stand against bullying. #laureniswearingpinkpants

**Eastern Synod-ELCIC** @ESynodELCIC Nov 8 2018

Incredibly beautiful. We are proud of Joshua and happy that we are able to support his studies through Murray Scholarship which is funded by the people of Trinity utheran [sic] in New Hamburg @TELCNewHamburg @TanyaRamer @MichaelPryse @itspastormark

**Mark Ehlebracht** @itspastormark Feb 24 2018

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<sup>48</sup> Rebecca Kay, “Identity and Marginality,” *eSharp 6:1 (Autumn 2005)*, 1, [https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media\\_41175\\_en.pdf](https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_41175_en.pdf)



Such a joy to be with our neighbours & so much rich learning for our affirmation class from Imam Syed. Thankful for the welcoming hospitality of @WaterlooMasjid Gracious, thoughtful, and totally awesome. #myelcic

While relatively benign, these tweets and their accompanying pictures (not shown) do paint a picture of people and faith communities putting their need to be seen doing a particular thing above the people involved; in other words, the Tweet becomes about my need to help, for example, and to be seen doing so, rather than the needs of the person or group receiving the help. The person or group or community becomes, in effect, a prop, and a subjugated prop at that, reinforcing all of the things that go into the making of an “other.” With the aforementioned tweets, one might ask why it is necessary to intimate that we are having a dinner for Syrians and refugees rather than simply saying “Potluck tonight at 7pm. All are welcome. Come join us if you can,” or having to say “here we are supporting this person in their studies with some cash” without even considering the (social) ramifications of or to the person they are speaking about. Any time we contrast ourselves with another, highlighting a quality that we want to lift up about ourselves, or in our attempts to create or control a narrative, we unavoidably make the contrasted recipient or group into an “other” and cripple the nurturing of inclusion and belonging. In other words, the use of social media by those in power, in this case defined as those who form the dominant culture, can further isolate those who are marginalized. In the context of colonialism and post-colonialism<sup>49</sup> this becomes more significant, especially for the church. Many of the narratives on the Syrian refugee situation offered via social media “othered” the refugees. Faith communities, parishioners, and other church representatives speaking on behalf of refugees, exemplified “a saviour complex that marginalize[d] Syrian refugees while offering a narrative of humanitarian and generous Canadians”<sup>50</sup> and churches. Even ascribing the descriptor of volunteer, some argue, becomes an act of othering the people one helps as strangers.<sup>51</sup> Further, portraying Syrian refugees as needy, having people sharing stories on their behalf via social media, and elevating core Western (and potentially ecclesial) values, becomes an unwitting conduit for upholding dominant western values, ideologies, and stereotypes.<sup>52</sup>

## Performance

It has been suggested that the use of a social media platform, such as Twitter, becomes, ultimately, a craving for affirmation as we desperately watch how people respond to our tweets and as we desire to not say something that causes others to shame us.<sup>53</sup> While social media itself is not solely responsible for these problems, it does provide a forum and platform for them. Authors like Cavarero make the distinction between what a person is and who a person is, and seek “[...] to address the failure of Western philosophy to comprehend

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<sup>49</sup> Some scholars dispute the term post-colonialism saying there is no “post.”

<sup>50</sup> Vappu Tyyskä, Jenna Blower, Samantha DeBoer, Shunya Kawai, Ashley Walcott, “The Syrian Refugee Crisis in Canadian Media,” *RCIS Working Paper* No. 2017/3, April 2017, 7, [https://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/rcis/documents/RCIS%20Working%20Paper%202017\\_3%20Tyyska%20et%20al.%20final.pdf](https://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/rcis/documents/RCIS%20Working%20Paper%202017_3%20Tyyska%20et%20al.%20final.pdf), accessed December 2, 2018.

<sup>51</sup> Neriko Musha Doerr, Volunteering as Othering: Understanding a Paradox of Social Distance, Obligation, and Reciprocity, *Partnerships: A Journal of Service-Learning & Civic Engagement*, Vol. 6, No. 2, Summer 2015, 36, accessed December 2, 2018, <http://libjournal.uncg.edu/prt/article/view/955/789>.

<sup>52</sup> “The Syrian Refugee Crisis in Canadian Media,” 14.

<sup>53</sup> Franklin Foer, Podcast #372: World Without Mind.

the uniqueness of ‘who’ a person is.”<sup>54</sup> In fact, following such a narrative of oneself is problematic and “[...] is always more akin to socialised *bricolage* than the certitude of autobiography. The stage of textual performance in 280 characters is narrative nonetheless and the porous-boundary of ‘what’ from ‘who’ problematizes the sense of self within the innately social politics of recognition.”<sup>55</sup> Understanding who one is is a complex process that, in the context of social media, has to navigate a virtual landscape of hypocrisy under the guise of transparency and authenticity, and that there is an essence of self that is in need of disclosure.<sup>56</sup>

This [...] can allow a culture to flourish whereby the individual is repeatedly subject to attacks as part of some crusade for revelation. This in turn is driven by the contemporary cults for authenticity, which often behave in a self-serving ‘gotcha’ mode, concerned with embarrassment or one-upmanship rather than engaging in some higher purpose to genuinely expose wrongdoing or further debate. This is a problem for the narratable self in the grander sense, because whilst authorial primacy does not constitute the self, rather it is part of understanding ‘who’ the self is—there is a complex mutuality at play.<sup>57</sup>

Further, with posts such as the aforementioned Twitter examples, we continue to consciously and unconsciously reinforce boundaries through social meanings developed through various narratives that affect our behaviors.<sup>58</sup> “Individual acts of discrimination on the basis of group-based stereotypes harms its victims, but group-based categories and meanings are social and collective. [When replicated over time] acts of discrimination have a cumulative and magnifying effect that may help explain many group-based inequalities.”<sup>59</sup>

Neuroscientists have mapped the networks in the brain that define group boundaries and that internalize meanings and assumptions about different social group [sic] into mental shortcuts. These shortcuts are used to evaluate groups, events, and anything encountered in the world, but they also underpin and inform judgments about groups and people that are members of those groups. Perception of individuals as members of a group is then filtered through these shared social meanings. Othering then becomes structured in the world through processes that are institutionalized or culturally embedded at different levels of society, from the neighborhood level to the larger political-legal order.<sup>60</sup>

## Shifting Interactions

The philosophical musings offered earlier, coupled with said reinforced social narratives, have become foundational in the shifting of how people interact with each other

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<sup>54</sup> Emilie Whitaker, “Social Media—Narrating and Othering Our Selves,” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 3, no. 7 (2014): 55-61, 59.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> John A. Powell and Stephen Menendian, “The Problem of Othering: Towards Inclusiveness and Belonging.” <http://www.otheringandbelonging.org/the-problem-of-othering/>, accessed December 2, 2018.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

and the world and their boundaries. Not limited to our own modern day contexts, nor use of social media platforms, historical precedents<sup>61</sup> exist. Franklin Foer cites various phenomena, such as the railroad or the telephone companies, which were, essentially, networks that tied people together; in the twenty-first century, it is companies and platforms like Facebook that tie people together.<sup>62</sup> Further, Foer makes a critical observation regarding these shifts – from one means of connection to another – using our understandings of monopolies as a springboard. In the context of “othering,” exchanging the word “monopolies” with “dominant cultures” is revealing. Networks tend to work most efficiently in singularity, namely, in *raison d’être* and in the business idea of “oneness.”<sup>63</sup> Perhaps it is this concept and sought after praxis of “oneness” that, inherently, creates an “other.”

There is a way in which all of this is very different than the monopolies of old. First is that these guys just possess so much data, which is this intimate window inside your head. This history of everything that you’ve read, everywhere you’ve traveled, everything that you’ve bought, which is then used to kind of increase your dependence on the network, to keep you engaged for as long as possible, or you could even say to addict you to their products. The second thing is that these companies are just so ambitious. There was kind of a limit to what the railroads could swallow, even as they tried to swallow up a bunch of stuff. These companies are everything companies. Google started off wanting to organize knowledge, now it’s building self-driving cars, it’s got a life-sciences company that’s trying to defeat death. Amazon started off as the everything store and now it’s a movie studio, it owns the Washington Post, it owns Whole Foods, it powers the Cloud, et cetera, et cetera. There’s really no end to the et ceteras.<sup>64</sup>

While Foer, throughout much of his book, concerns himself primarily with large technology companies, they, arguably hold much in common with social media platforms as their creators, encouraging oneness through messaging that the masses are, in turn, encouraged to parrot.

Some might argue that it was Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press that began to divide the world by isolating people in the anti-social act of reading.<sup>65</sup> Marshall McLuhan, who famously offered that ‘the medium is the message,’<sup>66</sup> lamented that “the alphabet is a technology of visual fragmentation and specialization”<sup>67</sup> that produced a “desert of classified data.”<sup>68</sup> Social media platforms that are driven by a given dominant culture, propel an agenda of influence that is informed by technology’s and platform companies’ sophisticated understanding of human nature that, in turn, is used to shape their vision of human nature. In other words, the sophisticated understanding of human nature begins to translate who

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<sup>61</sup> Some might refer to this as a “pre-text.”

<sup>62</sup> “Podcast #372: World Without Mind — The Existential Threat of Big Tech,” accessed April 8, 2018, <https://www.artofmanliness.com/2018/01/18/world-without-mind-franklin-foer-interview/>.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Franklin Foer, *World without Mind the Existential Threat of Big Tech* (New York, Penguin Press, 2017), 25.

<sup>66</sup> Marshal McLuhan as quoted by Franklin Foer in *World without Mind the Existential Threat of Big Tech* (New York, Penguin Press, 2017), 25.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone, eds., *Essential McLuhan* (Basic Books, 1995), 92.

we are and what we can become into a version that is not our own; we may ourselves become the other.

### Algorithm: Creation

At the center of this agenda, and the heart that drives the lifeblood through social media platforms, is the algorithm. Just as knowledge was developed through the writings of philosophers and writers who, in turn, developed symbols and signs in their drive to understand and perhaps subjugate, Gottfried Leibniz contemplated language with a desire to improve communication between all of the peoples of the world when he created a new lexicon that he named “the universal characteristic.”<sup>69</sup> Leibniz “[...]argued that a new set of symbols and expressions would lead science and philosophy to new truths, to a new age of reason, to a deeper appreciation of the universe’s elegance and harmony, to the divine. What he imagined was an alphabet of human thought.”<sup>70</sup> This becomes foundational to the label of “other” that we ascribe. Leibniz thought that he, together with academics, could create an encyclopedia of core concepts which he named “primitives” which would include things like earth, colours, and God, namely fundamental, incontestably true concepts from philosophy, physics, and geometry, and assign them each a numerical value.<sup>71</sup> These numerical values “formed the basis for a new calculus of thought, [that] he called the calculus ratiocinator.”<sup>72</sup> Leibniz essentially endeavoured to turn thought into mathematics which would allow for a method of adjudicating questions of truth.<sup>73</sup> Leibniz illustrated how this might work when he asked the question *what is a human?* Foer outlines it thus:

A rational animal, of course [...]is] an insight that can be written like this:

rational x animal = man

[...] ‘Animal,’ he suggested, might be represented with the number two; ‘rational’ with the number three.

Therefore:  $2 \times 3 = 6$  [...]

Leibniz asked, for example, are all men monkeys? Well, he knew the number assigned to monkeys, ten. If ten can’t be divided by six, and six can’t be divided by ten, then we know: There’s no element of monkey in man – and no element of man in monkey.<sup>74</sup>

While Leibniz’s goal was to facilitate knowledge, and knowledge that could be derived from computation,<sup>75</sup> its byproduct could well be “othering.” “It would be an effortless process, *cogitation caeca* or blind thought. Humans were no longer even needed to conceive new ideas.<sup>76</sup> While Leibniz envisioned this new calculus of thought enabling peace and harmony,

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<sup>69</sup> Franklin Foer, *The Existential Threat of Big Tech*, 65.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

his methodology has been harnessed less altruistically and more for manipulation. Still, Leibniz's altruism bears emphasizing:

'Once this has been done, if ever further controversies shall arise, there should be no more reason for dispute between two philosophers than between two calculators.' Intellectual and moral argument could be settled with the disagreeing parties declaring 'Let's calculate!' There would be no need for wars, let alone theological controversy, because truth would be placed on the terra firma of math.<sup>77</sup>

This becomes what we now know as the algorithm.

## Algorithms: Uses

Algorithms become constant (potential) threads in othering, weaving their way through privacy concerns, tightening the noose of conformity, and pressing on to what Foer labels throughout his work a hive mentality, the byproduct of which can be intellectual incapacitation, the end of private contemplation, autonomous thought, and solitary introspection;<sup>78</sup> the perfect foundation for othering. This is particularly apparent and dangerous, especially when applied to social media platforms, in that they have the power to generate feedback loops where users get only what they want to hear.<sup>79</sup> Further, this is dangerous for social movements that capitalize on othering. "We just get driven further and further into our corners through tech that's giving us what we want."<sup>80</sup> Foer is quick to point out that the true danger with the misuse of an algorithm is that it shifts humanity's trial and error method for creating knowledge and, essentially, the removal of humans from the process of inquiry.<sup>81</sup> When leveraged by a radical group, the algorithm has the ability to nudge you in a particular direction, play with your mood and, as Foer notes, does so always "reflect[ing] the subconscious of its creators."<sup>82</sup> We do not have to imagine how "a fundamental mathematical law underlying human social relationships that governs the balance of who and what we all care about"<sup>83</sup> might be used nefariously or how this might be the ultimate knowledge to subjugate.

## Algorithm: Consequences

What then, exactly, are the consequences of the algorithmic erosion of free will? What happens when the burden of choice is relieved from humanity? Franklin Foer offers that

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Tom McCarthy, "Franklin Foer: 'Big Tech Has Been Rattled. The Conversation Has Changed'," *The Guardian*, October 19, 2017, accessed March 3, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/oct/19/big-tech-franklin-foer-book-world-without-mind>.

<sup>80</sup> Business Radio, "A 'World Without Mind': Big Tech's Dangerous Influence," *Knowledge@Wharton*, accessed November 15, 2018, <http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/world-without-mind/>.

<sup>81</sup> Franklin Foer, *The Existential Threat of Big Tech*, 69.

<sup>82</sup> Michael Harris, "Review: Franklin Foer's World Without Mind Explores the Dangers of Tech Monopolies," *The Globe and Mail*, September 22, 2017, accessed November 20, 2018, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/book-reviews/review-franklin-foers-world-without-mind-explores-the-dangers-of-tech-monopolies/article36363670/>.

<sup>83</sup> Michael Rundle, "Zuckerberg: Telepathy Is the Future of Facebook," *WIRED*, October 04, 2017, accessed April 8, 2018, <http://www.wired.co.uk/article/facebook-zuckerberg-qa-the-future>.

“algorithms fuel a sense of omnipotence, the condescending belief that our behavior can be altered, without our even being aware of the hand guiding us, in a superior direction. That’s always been the danger of the engineering mindset, as it moves beyond its roots in building inanimate stuff and begins to design a more perfect social world.”<sup>84</sup> The algorithm, and its manifestations as social media platform, become a portal to information and curated experiences that take on a God-like quality in the way it functions and the way it is regarded; social media is very much a lens through which we can view humanity and the whole world as it can serve – and does for many – as a filter of our reality.<sup>85</sup> If social media serves as a lens, it follows that it can dramatically inform and even determine one’s hermeneutic, with the new arbiters of media, arts, politics and the economy<sup>86</sup> informing our identity, shaping who we are and what we will or can become, heightening our emotions, like anxiety or insecurity or even our very consciousness, along the way.<sup>87</sup> The nefarious intention becomes not just influencing decisions but manipulating and molding players into an envisioned (dominant) culture.<sup>88</sup> What is originally perceived as the enablement of authenticity and self-expression also enables a herd mentality through conformism and homogenization,<sup>89</sup> the byproduct of which can be a further entrenchment of othering; if you are outside of the “herd,” you can very quickly become the other. “Marginalized groups often face complex choices in defining and enacting their own identities. They may choose, or feel compelled, to assimilate to the norms and values of the dominant group, thus abandoning alternative identities, or at least judging them by the standards of the dominant group.”<sup>90</sup>

## Social Media: Culture and Community

Electronic and social media is changing the way people and organizations and communities communicate and interact with each other. The statistics are remarkable. The internet has 4.2 billion users and there are 3.03 billion active social media users. Internet users have an average of 7.6 social media accounts, social media users grew by 121 million between the second and third quarters of 2017 (that’s 1 every 15 seconds), and Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp handle sixty billion messages a day.<sup>91</sup> Facebook, originally designed to connect students at Harvard University, now has more than 200 million users who upload 850 million photos and eight million videos every month.<sup>92</sup> A study in the United States has determined that 90-95% of American teenagers make regular use of social media

<sup>84</sup> Franklin Foer, *The Existential Threat of Big Tech*, 77.

<sup>85</sup> Andrew Keen, "Franklin Foer on the Existential Threat of Big Tech," Literary Hub, November 06, 2017, accessed April 7, 2018, <https://lithub.com/franklin-foer-on-the-existential-threat-of-big-tech/>.

<sup>86</sup> Jon Gertner, "Are Tech Giants Robbing Us of Our Decision-making and Our Individuality?" The Washington Post, October 06, 2017, accessed April 8, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/are-tech-giants-robbing-us-of-our-decision-making-and-our-individuality/2017/10/06/a96e05e0-9fb0-11e7-9c8d-cf053ff30921\\_story.html?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.2a59e274e27f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/are-tech-giants-robbing-us-of-our-decision-making-and-our-individuality/2017/10/06/a96e05e0-9fb0-11e7-9c8d-cf053ff30921_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.2a59e274e27f).

<sup>87</sup> Franklin Foer, *The Existential Threat of Big Tech*, 15.

<sup>88</sup> "World Without Mind by Franklin Foer," PenguinRandomhouse.com, accessed November 30, 2018, <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/533937/world-without-mind-by-franklin-foer/9781101981115>.

<sup>89</sup> Franklin Foer, *The Existential Threat of Big Tech*.

<sup>90</sup> Rebecca Kay, "Identity and Marginality," *eSharp 6:1 (Autumn 2005)*, 3, [https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media\\_41175\\_en.pdf](https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_41175_en.pdf)

<sup>91</sup> Kit Smith, "121 Amazing Social Media Statistics and Facts" BrandWatch.com (October 2, 2018), accessed December 7, 2018, <https://www.brandwatch.com/blog/amazing-social-media-statistics-and-facts/>

<sup>92</sup> Ameer Khan, "Ethical Issues in Social Networking" (October 2015):3, doi: 10.13140/RG.2.1.4289.6080, accessed January 18, 2018. Referenced in TH664H, Professional Ethics, Winter 2018.



(Common Sense Media 2012).<sup>93</sup> Statistics Canada reports that nearly all of Canadians use the Internet every single day, with the province of Alberta having the highest percentage of Internet users, and that 76% of all Canadians own a Smartphone, 71% own a laptop, and 54% own a tablet.<sup>94</sup> Further, when asked how they perceived technology, 77% of Canadians feel that it helps them communicate with others, 66% said that it saves time, 52% use the Internet to make more informed decisions, 36% feel the Internet helps them to be more creative, and over 60% of Canadians aged 15 – 64 believe that life is better as a result of technology use.<sup>95</sup> Franklin Foer believes that companies like Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Apple have “...created a world in which we’re constantly watched and always distracted.”<sup>96</sup> By any account, those statistics are worthy of paying attention to, especially as they relate to how we experience community and how the culture of community can be shaped. Foer might suggest that big technology companies have a hand in determining which culture becomes the dominant culture. The blogger Jesse Rice offers that there is no hierarchy between real and online experiences but rather that they are simply different ways of relating to one another.

“Community” is not understood as a dichotomy between “real” or “online” relationships but as a composite of both. This growing reality forces us to adapt the way we think about community. It is no longer enough to define community in either good or bad terms, to debate whether one brand of relating (“real”) is better than another (“online”), though ... there is certainly a qualitative difference between the two. A more inclusive definition is needed, one that takes into account the fact that the always-on do not make traditional distinctions between real and online relationships.<sup>97</sup>

As we begin to decipher the idea of community, we will invariably find ourselves in the tension between individual libertarianism and utopian collectivism.

### Individual Libertarianism and Utopian Collectivism

While machines have the potential to “usher in a new era of co-operation,”<sup>98</sup> the desire of the powers that be (often times large firms) is to, essentially, embrace “...libertarianism for themselves but collectivism for everyone else.”<sup>99</sup> This can undergird the process of othering and, philosophically, may point to the tension between the human condition in two worlds, namely the virtual and the physical. J.C.R. Licklider, when explaining how his invention of the internet would ease social isolation, reportedly said “life will be

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<sup>93</sup>Karen-Marie Yust, “Digital Power: Exploring the Effects of Social Media on Children’s Spirituality,” *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality* 19, no. 2 (2014): 133, doi:10.1080/1364426x.2014.924908 Previously referenced in TH765A.

<sup>94</sup> Statistics Canada, “The Internet and Digital Technology,” Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, November 14, 2017, accessed March 26, 2019, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2017032-eng.htm>.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Franklin Foer, *The Existential Threat of Big Tech*, 8.

<sup>97</sup> Jesse Rice, *The Church of Facebook: How the Hyperconnected Are Redefining Community* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009), 170– 71. Previously referenced in TH765A, June 9, 2017.

<sup>98</sup> Franklin Foer, *The Existential Threat of Big Tech*, 26.

<sup>99</sup> Franklin Foer, Podcast #372: World Without Mind.

happier for the on-line individual' and how Tim Berners-Lee described the possibilities of the World Wide Web he created [saying] 'hope in life comes from the interconnections among all the people in the world.'"<sup>100</sup>

## Self-Censorship and Individuality

The author Ben Tarnoff notes that large stakeholders in the social media race, in their quest for community and molding community into a given desired image necessitates "...the demolition of privacy, individuality, creativity, free will, competitive markets, the media and publishing industries, the distinction between facts and lies, the possibility for political compromise, and the space for solitary contemplation."<sup>101</sup> As noted above, on the surface it might appear that social media enables authenticity and self-expression, but its structures and algorithms, together with how people use the tool of social media, point to a different result. "If you know your thoughts are being read you are less likely to engage with [...] risky thoughts, risky ideas. That could put a stifle on all sorts of things: scientific advancements, advancements in psychology, et cetera, et cetera."<sup>102</sup> Social media may well have ushered in an era of the ultimate public sphere where every idea is turned around for everyone to see.<sup>103</sup> The consequence is, of course, self-censorship and a careful curation of our online presences so as not to be "othered" by individuals or the masses. After all, as humans, we crave attention and it is noteworthy that our anxieties and insecurities can be amplified by social media platforms. As noted, when using a social media platform such as Twitter, it becomes, ultimately, a craving for affirmation as we desperately watch how people respond to our tweets and as we desire to not say something that causes others to shame us; platforms such as these and the companies that control them are playing with and manipulating exceptionally powerful emotions.<sup>104</sup> It is not out of the realm of possibility, then, to imagine how social media can influence morality and behaviour.

The idea of radical or ultimate transparency is key. The theory is that

...the sharing of our intimate details will disinfect the moral mess of our lives. Even if we don't intend for our secrets to become public knowledge, their exposure will improve society. With the looming threat that our embarrassing information will be broadcast, we'll behave better. And perhaps the ubiquity of incriminating photos and damning revelations will prod us to become more tolerant of one another's sins. 'The days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know is probably coming to an end pretty quickly,' [Facebook's Mark] Zuckerberg has said.<sup>105</sup>

If, in fact, our autonomy and individuality is being eroded through social media and its unrelenting push towards collectivism, we might ask how this happens? In the context of othering, specifically pertaining to influencing morality and behaviour, we might ask why?

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<sup>100</sup> Franklin Foer, *The Existential Threat of Big Tech*, 26.

<sup>101</sup> Ben Tarnoff, "World Without Mind by Franklin Foer Review – the Turn against Big Tech," *The Guardian*, October 25, 2017, accessed April 3, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/oct/25/world-without-mind-by-franklin-foer-review>.

<sup>102</sup> Brett McKay in Franklin Foer, Podcast #372: World Without Mind.

<sup>103</sup> Franklin Foer, Podcast #372: World Without Mind.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> Franklin Foer, *The Existential Threat of Big Tech*, 60.



## Erosion of Autonomy

With the dawn of new technologies, devices can begin to know us better than we know ourselves. The desire of a dominant culture – here one that manifests itself electronically and through social media platforms - is to create an environment where we, collectively and individually, download our decision making to the electronic devices we use.<sup>106</sup> “If our public selves merged with our private selves we would be morally better human beings. [Mark Zuckerberg] also claims we would be more forgiving of other people because everybody would constantly be making mistakes and those mistakes would be exposed.”<sup>107</sup> “...Facebook has a strong, paternalistic view on what’s best for you, and it’s trying to transport you there.”<sup>108</sup> Again, this all appears altruistic on the surface under the guise of authenticity and free and self-expression. However, through the filtering of information, winners and losers can be determined with just the right algorithm, knowledge can be subjugated, and humanity can be molded.

## Control

Professor Mary Philip, in her course *Other Ways of Reading, Interpreting, and Being*, noted that “to be a translator is to be a traitor.”<sup>109</sup> In the context of pure translating and trying to be faithful to a text, there is nothing nefarious. In the context of trying to drive an agenda, it is something else entirely. Martin Luther, in his letter on translating, wrote: “When translating to German we must be guided by the language of the mother, the children, the common man, and do our translating accordingly so they can understand it and recognize that we are speaking to them.”<sup>110</sup> Social media begins much like Martin Luther’s rationale for translating the Scriptures into the language of the people, but instead with a specific agenda of manipulation. Through complex algorithms, social media platforms can tailor messages such that they are speaking to us, to nudge us in a given direction towards a desired outcome. Siri and Alexa speak to me, as do my social media feeds, parroting words and phrases that are my own, with a veiled goal, ultimately, of control. Social media platforms, together with their electronic devices, are designed to be addictive, “trying to stay with us from the moment that we wake up in the morning until the moment that we go to bed at night. They want to become our personal assistants. They want to become the vehicles to deliver us news, entertainment, to track our health. They want to obey our every beck and call.”<sup>111</sup>

## Syncretism and Isolation

In addition to the aforementioned feedback loops, our own tailoring of the tailored messages enable one to be exceptionally syncretic in the material we consume, be it news, social feeds, or networking with like-minded people. All of this fundamentally and ultimately

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<sup>106</sup> Initially explored in TH664X: *The Art and Science of Interpretation*, with Dr. Allan Jorgenson, Martin Luther University College, Winter Term, 2018.

<sup>107</sup> Franklin Foer, Podcast #372: World Without Mind.

<sup>108</sup> Franklin Foer, *The Existential Threat of Big Tech*, 61.

<sup>109</sup> Mary Philip, TH648Z: *Other Ways of Reading, Interpreting, and Being*, Martin Luther University College, Fall Term, 2018. Play of words in Italian, *Traduttore traditore*, meaning translator traitor.

<sup>110</sup> Martin Luther, “On Translating: An Open Letter, 1530,” 35:189.

<sup>111</sup> PBS NewsHour, “Are Big Tech Companies Trying to Control Our Lives?” PBS, September 15, 2017, accessed April 10, 2018, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/big-tech-companies-trying-control-lives>. Interview conducted by Paul Solman.

begins to shift commerce. Commerce is a significantly social experience when, for example, one is at the store and interacts with staff and customers alike. Foer notes, almost as a leitmotif throughout his book, that social experiences such as these are part of what makes life meaningful, which then informs the way that we think about other human beings.<sup>112</sup> If we, instead, do everything in physical isolation, as we essentially can now, how is and how will human interaction change? What will be the consequences of such a shift? Some authors, Foer included, together with critics, hypothesize that a potential consequence is the complete merging of human and machine.

## Consequence

This consequence, that merges human and machine completely, was named “singularity” by Ray Kurzweil. “The singularity will be achieved at the time when the exponential growth of the power of computers and technology hits such a speed that it fundamentally changes the world, and humans’ role in it. [...He] predicts that we will be neurologically hooked up to computers in the not too distant future, and that technology will do more good than harm.”<sup>113</sup>

Perhaps this is the ultimate subjugation and the ultimate othering. Subjugation in that Kurzweil’s messianic-esque prediction that describes the moment when machines and humans merge and then machines become smarter than humans; the machines will then subjugate humans, in their essence, thought patterns, values, judgements, and networking. Then, as Foer describes, humans will upload their brains into a virtual world where they would live forever;<sup>114</sup> this relinquishing, being rooted in an all too nefarious and shifting landscape might, then, become the ultimate subjugation. Kurzweil, who thought that technology is a phenomenon that grows explosively rather than in linear fashion, might agree. If, one day, our brains can be uploaded, this might fulfil “...Descartes’ dreams of liberating the mind from the prison of the body.”<sup>115</sup> Subjugation and liberation might be two sides of the same, complex coin. And, in a final twist, as Angela Chen observes and draws from Foer, this liberation or separation turns us away from the intellectual work that makes us human by destroying the possibility of contemplation.<sup>116</sup>

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have begun to outline some of the ways in which social media platforms and large technology companies are fundamentally shifting the way people and organizations communicate and interact with each other. When explored with the idea of othering, it is imperative that these shifts be more closely examined. Marginalization and identity have a complex relationship, as do autonomy and subjugation, self-expression, authenticity, and the public square, and libertarianism and utopian collectivism. Foer

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<sup>112</sup> Franklin Foer, *The Existential Threat of Big Tech*.

<sup>113</sup> Nicholas Clairmont, “The Singularity Of Ray Kurzweil,” Big Think, August 12, 2013, accessed October 30, 2018, <http://bigthink.com/100-biggest-ideas/the-singularity-of-ray-kurzweil>.

<sup>114</sup> Franklin Foer, *The Existential Threat of Big Tech*, 47.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Angela Chen, “Franklin Foer on How Silicon Valley Is Threatening Our Humanity,” The Verge, September 10, 2017, accessed August 25, 2018, <http://www.theverge.com/2017/9/10/16263366/franklin-foer-book-world-without-mind-silicon-valley-technology-publishing-journalism>.

concludes his book by saying that “[t]he contemplative life remains freely available to us through our choices – what we read and buy, how we commit to leisure and self-improvement, the passing over of every temptation, our preservation of the quiet spaces, an intentional striving to become the masters of our mastery.”<sup>117</sup> To this, the philosophers might say take heed for the other is always us, the pragmatists, take care for the other will be us, and the other, listen, for we are they.

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