

Homework 2

Networked Life (NETS 112)

Fall 2017

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Posted November 28, 2017. Due in hardcopy format Thursday, December 21 (details TBD).

For this assignment, you should write an essay synthesizing, comparing and contrasting the assigned books “Data and Goliath” (Schneier) and “Weapons of Math Destruction” (O’Neil). Your essay should be between 7 to 10 pages in the approximate format of this document. However, much more important than the length of your essay will be the depth of thought and creativity it exhibits. The format of your essay is open-ended, but it should clearly demonstrate that you read and considered both books in their entirety (so essays that focus too much on one book will be penalized), and that you also considered the themes of the book in light of the rest of the material in the course. What follows is a non-exhaustive list of topics you might want to touch on in your essay; each is labeled as either “required” (meaning you must discuss it) or “suggested” (meaning that it’s just one optional example of something you might want to discuss, but is not required):

- What are the major problems identified by both books? In what ways are those problems similar or overlapping, and in what ways are they different? Illustrate with examples from the books and other parts of class. (required)
- What are some potential solutions to the problems identified by both books? In what ways are the solutions similar and different? Again illustrate with examples. (required)
- How do the major themes of both books relate to topics, results and readings discussed throughout the rest of the course? (required)
- What are the similarities and differences in the processes involved in data collection vs. the use of data for statistical modeling and machine learning? (suggested)
- Discuss the ways in which surveillance and consumer targeting overlap and are different. (suggested)

- How are digital surveillance and algorithmic decision-making different from and similar to the way things were done before computers were in widespread use? What things have gotten better, and what things have gotten worse? (suggested)
- Both books discuss consumer awareness and transparency; what are some of the concerns and solutions discussed? (suggested)
- Discuss some of the themes of both books in light of your own experiences using modern technology. (suggested)

Again, the suggested items above are just examples of themes, and you are encouraged to think of your own as long as you have something relevant to the books to say about them.

In terms of grading, there is no single “correct” essay I am looking for, as the diversity of suggested topics above shows. You should definitely cover the required topics. But an essay that simply summarizes the two books without any synthesis or further thought demonstrated will not get a high score. There is ample room for creativity of theme and the incorporation of examples from your own experience here, and you are encouraged to exercise it to receive the highest score (and have the most fun).

This document will be updated as further ideas for possible topics come to me, or arise in next week’s in-class discussions of the books.