

Data doom: 5 steps from Davos to digital dystopia

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An owner plays with a Sony robot dog 'Aibo' which is packed with artificial intelligence and internet capability

Intelligent robots and all-knowing online networks threaten to drag humanity into a "totalitarian" nightmare of mind control, mass unemployment and children hooked on smartphones, experts warned at

this week's Davos summit.

Online retailers and social networks collect so much data about us that they can watch us, control us and will transform us entirely, said Yuval Noah Harari, the Israeli author of bestselling books about technology and anthropology.

"This will be decided by the people who own the data. They control not just the future of humanity but the future of life itself," he told a panel in Davos.

"If democracy cannot adapt to these new conditions, then humans will come to live under the rule of digital dictatorship."

As envisioned by various leaders, business people and thinkers at this year's World Economic Forum gathering, here are five stages through which digital technology will subjugate and dehumanise our race if we are not careful:

Robots taking our jobs

The first phase of the data revolution is already under way. The robots are taking our jobs.

While we plod around with our eyes on our smartphones like digital zombies, buses are starting to drive themselves and machines are ringing our groceries through the cash register.

The WEF estimates that new technology could affect 1.4 million jobs in the United States alone by 2026.

"This time it is not just a question of blue- or white-collar workers," said Alain Roumilhac, the head of US recruiter Manpower in France.

"We are experiencing a revolution in skills," with both manual and administrative tasks likely to be carried out by robots, he said.

Car makers are fast developing driverless vehicles. Online retail giant Amazon this week opened a 1,800 square-foot (170 square-metre) cashier-less convenience store with cameras and [artificial intelligence](#) scanning the items remotely.

Addiction

Karl Marx called religion "the opium of the people", but now another powerful drug is taking over.

Online firms know how much we like thumbing away at our smartphones and are doing their best to keep us at it, several prominent delegates at Davos warned.

"They deliberately engineer addiction to the services they provide," Soros said. "This can be very harmful, particularly for adolescents."

Marc Benioff, chief executive of major US cloud software firm Salesforce, said there were "a lot of parallels" between web apps and cigarettes.

"Product designers are trying to make user interfaces more addictive than ever," he told AFP in Davos.



A human dancer performs next to a stripper robot at the Sapphire Gentlemen's Club in Las Vegas

"This needs to be discussed and evaluated," he said. "Technology has to be normalised. It has to be regulated just like every other industry."

Mind control

Once the apps have got us physically addicted, experts fear, they will go to work on our minds by logging into our brain waves and bodily functions.

"We've reached the point where we can hack not just computers but we

can hack human beings and other organisms... Advances in computer science, machine learning and artificial intelligence are giving us the computing power," Harari said.

"Brain activity, blood pressure can be tracked by an algorithm which can appeal to your sexual preference. Algorithms can predict desires, manipulate emotions, take decisions on your behalf."

Data dictators

The fourth stage will be a political coup—albeit a quiet, digital one.

The World Economic Forum calls the digital data age "the fourth industrial revolution". But what will the new regime be like?

Billionaire investor George Soros said social media companies like Facebook and Google risk compromising themselves by cooperating with authorities in Russia and China and creating a "web of totalitarian control".

In an outspoken dinner speech during the summit, he warned of an "alliance between authoritarian states and these large, data-rich IT monopolies".

World leaders at Davos echoed the warning about data and power.

"The danger is that we are too slow and that the world is destroying us while we are still asking who really owns our data," said German Chancellor Angela Merkel in a speech.

Dehumanisation

In response to the tech upheaval, a grouping of companies at Davos launched Skillset, a platform to help workers evaluate their job skills and acquire new ones.

But while the companies were looking to preserve their human resources, others were casting doubt on the very future of the "H" in "HR".

Once technology has taken our data, our political rights, our jobs and our free will, it will come for our souls.

For Harari, author of the two-book series "Homo Sapiens", the tech shift is an evolutionary one.

"By hacking organisms, elites might gain the power to engineer the future of life itself," he said.

"By hacking organisms, elites might gain the pow" If too much of the data becomes concentrated in too few hands, humanity will split not into classes, it will split into different species."

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