MIRROR MIRROR ON THE WALL

What is the future for us all?

We live in an age of big data, with the platforms and devices we use to help us manage our social networks, indeed our entire lives, talking to each other more and more. When it works, it's brilliant. When it doesn't, our lives can be affected in ways we can't even imagine, often for the worse.

Take Lacie from *Black Mirror: Nosedive* (2016). She's just a young woman trying to navigate modern life, but in the dystopian future imagined by Charlie Brooker it's your personal popularity score that determines your life chances. People rate each other on every social interaction and wear special augmented reality contact lenses that tell them who's worth knowing and who isn't. Lacie's life starts going off the rails as she makes desperate attempt after attempt to get her score up to a 4.5 to land her dream home.

Should we let technology get out of hand like that? Do we even have the power to influence what technologies we live with and how they are used? Should we develop a code of ethics for technology?

💡 KEY IDEAS

Despite its candy colours, the future mapped out by *Black Mirror* is a dark one. It reminds us of Orwell's *1984*, where everyone spies on everyone else, big brother is always watching you, and you don't know who to trust.

How far are we really away from this scenario becoming our own reality? We're constantly curating ourselves on social media. On Instagram, the number of followers you have shows how popular you are; YouTube followers have become a unit of currency. But it's not just the people we know about who are spying on us; Governments and corporations have access to our data, and the more content we produce on social media, the more they know about us. Are we sleepwalking into a '**Surveillance Society'**, as the Canadian scholar David Lyon suggests?

📖 KEY READINGS

Beall, A. (2018). It's time to address artificial intelligence's ethical problems. *Wired*. Available from: bit.ly/2DM6Io7.

Kang, S. (2017). Can tech ever really be neutral? *World Economic Forum.* Available from: bit.ly/2J2TN5v.

Lyon, D. (2009). Surveillance, power and everyday life. In: Kalantzis-Cope, P. and Gherab-Martín, K. (eds.) *Emerging digital spaces in contemporary society*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 107-120.

Black Mirror features futuristic technological scenarios where it seems like technology has taken on a life of its own – with extreme consequences. But this isn't how we see the gadgets that form part of our everyday lives. In fact, tech companies don't want us to really *see* technology at all. One of Nokia's marketing slogans is "It's not technology, it's what you do with it". Apple is making its consumer gadgets slimmer, sleeker, shinier all the time. It's almost as if they are disappearing into thin air.

Technology itself is neutral; it's about how we use it that counts. This is called the **neutrality thesis**, and most of the time, it seems to work. Think about the atomic bomb or drones? These are technologies where negative consequences for human beings are built into their very design – no matter how they are used. Are there good uses and bad uses of technology? What does good and bad mean in this context? This is at the heart of ethics. A framework that helps us decide how to behave, how to make the right decision and how to lead a good life. Would it be possible to develop a code of **ethics for technology?**

ACTIVITIES

1. What do ethics mean to you? How do you decide what's right or wrong in everyday life? Compare your answers in groups.

2. Pick three technologies you use every day. For each of them, discuss with your teammates whether you think they are 'good', 'bad' or 'neutral'. How do they affect your life? Can you think of wider consequences for society? Could we change the way we engage with these technologies to create positive change in society?

3. How could we make future technologies more ethical? Think about who is involved in the spread of specific technologies – where should the responsibility for making technologies ethical lie?

4. Create your own idea for a *Black Mirror* Scenario. Think of a technology (either something that already exists or something that hasn't been invented yet) and think of how it could end up shaping people's lives – for better or for worse. Tell the story through the eyes of your protagonist and discuss what ethical implications your technology has/might have.*