

## Cole's Text: "You are the product!"

"Do you own your name? What about your face? Your personality?"

I could pull out a pen and paper and start writing down a million different things about you and that would be perfectly legal because what exactly am I taking? Nothing. I am copying information, concepts and ideas that can be expressed as data and used for various purposes. Some of which you probably wouldn't be OK with and, at that point, you probably would knock the pen and paper out of my hands. Right?

Now what if I had a business where the entire premise is you giving me that information? We all use social media here, some of you more than others, but no one here doesn't have a digital footprint. It is, in fact, very difficult not to have one. Think about what you are really doing when you use social media. It's not like most other businesses. Right? When you want to buy an apple you go to the grocery store and give them a dollar—currency in exchange for material goods. The same applies for services. But what exactly are you giving social media? Social media is free.

Now, your phone isn't free and neither is the electricity that powers it. But none of those costs actually go to the social media platform. It doesn't cost anything to make an account and there aren't any micro-transactions when you want to post something. So what exactly is the platform getting out of rendering the service for you? The answer is you. You are the product.

The kind people at Snapchat Instagram and Twitter don't give you their services for free. Rather—whenever you use them they are renting your eyeballs; showing you advertisements for product after product that they are paid to display, and paid even more if they get a click. But they are not just showing you ads. No. They are watching you watching—looking for patterns and trends so they can better

show you more relevant things and, of course, sell that information to other people; who also want to show you more relevant things...”

**With permission—Cole Lameyer**

*TOK student at the French American International School, class of 2021*

## **The Generative Questions**

- 1. Using specific examples, what are some of the differences in the user experience between “free” platforms and subscription platforms?**

**Are “free” platforms really free?**

**Do subscription platforms entail some of the characteristics of free platforms?**

- 2. How does the social media business model play into the emergence of so called, “filter bubbles” and “rabbit holes”?**
- 3. To what extent are highly personalized internet searches and social media responsible for “fake news,” “alternative facts,” and extreme conspiracy theories like QAnon?**

**Has this exacerbated during the COVID lockdown?**

- 4. If “you are the product,” what ethical parallels might be made with the predicament of the denizens of Plato’s Cave and the 1998 movie *The Truman Show*, whose protagonist was “on the air unaware”?**