

Hamza Haque

Mr. Peers

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How *Space Odyssey's* HAL shows why we should not be dependent on technology

Fifty-three years ago, Stanley Kubrick's astonishing film, *2001: A Space Odyssey* premiered in Uptown Theater, and it was a magnificent film that is widely regarded as one of the greatest and most influential films ever made (Sight & Sound). In 1968, *Space Odyssey* unveiled the curtain and showed how the future will be in terms of space travel. However, *Space Odyssey* also unveiled the dark truths of technology, and many of its scenes can be compared to the events happening today. In *Space Odyssey*, the audience can see the importance of the character, HAL. HAL is a sentient computer whose role is to oversee the ship's operations (O'Carroll). HAL's capabilities and roles are very crucial, and HAL is considered a dependable member of the crew (O'Carroll). However, this dependency on HAL turns out to be catastrophic for the crew. As the current society is advancing and changing drastically, *Space Odyssey's* HAL shows why we should not be dependable on technology due to the threat that technology poses to human lives, the rapidly increasing lack of control humans have over technology and their privacy, and the effect technology has over important skills. Let us first see how *Space Odyssey's* HAL represents the threat technology poses to human lives.

One of the reasons how *Space Odyssey* shows why we should not be dependable on technology is that the goals and purposes of *Space Odyssey's* HAL represent the threat that

technology poses to human lives. The actions of a computer are determined by algorithms programmed by a human, and it is up to the human to decide what is the goal that the computer should achieve (Rockmore). For example, algorithms, programmed by humans, generally need to achieve some sort of goal, such as winning a game of chess, connect four, checkers, connect-the-dots, etc. They can also perform tasks such as measure the energy use of a house or the oxygen level in the atmosphere. However, what happens if an ethical dilemma occurs while the computer (or AI) is reaching its goal? For *Space Odyssey*'s HAL, staying alive and completing the mission is more important than the lives of the crew. What about an autonomous car being controlled by a human-programmed artificial intelligence (AI)? Is its goal of reaching its destination more important than the lives of its passengers or the pedestrians? There have been multiple crashes involving self-driving cars over the last five years (Schmelzer). Furthermore, multiple people have been killed in these crashes, with a recent one being on April 18, 2021 (Pietsch). In this particular incident, the Tesla Autopilot feature was engaged but was not able to detect that no one was in the driver seat, and instead of stopping, it continued to go to its destination (its goal) and as a result, it crashed (Root). This can be compared to how HAL's programmed algorithm caused him to give more importance to his goal (completing the mission) at the expense of the crew's lives. In short, HAL's dangerous algorithm can also be compared to many other emerging pieces of technology that cause a threat to human lives and is one of the many reasons why we should not be dependent on technology.

Not only does *Space Odyssey*'s HAL show how technology can pose a threat to human lives, but it also shows the rapidly increasing lack of control humans have over technology and their privacy. *Space Odyssey*'s HAL had complete control over the entire ship's operations, whereas the crew had no control over HAL. It took Dr. David Bowman, the protagonist, to

attempt a daring move through space without oxygen to eventually reach HAL's processor core and disconnect HAL's circuits (*Space Odyssey* 1:41:42 – 1:55:31). This lack of control over technology is an increasing threat to human privacy. Throughout the *Space Odyssey* movie, the audience can see that HAL is able to observe the crew's movements, sleeping patterns, conversations, etc. Furthermore, when Dr. David Bowman and Dr. Frank Poole go into an extravehicular activity (EVA) pod in order to discuss their doubts about HAL's performance and decide to disconnect him if needed, both crew members are certain that HAL cannot hear them (*Space Odyssey* 1:24:02 – 1:27:00). Yet, HAL's cameras are able to see them, and HAL can read the crew member's lips, thus being able to learn the plan (*Space Odyssey* 1:27:01 – 1:27:22). This scene of lack of privacy and constant observation is happening all the time around the world! Humans are being continuously monitored through either their phones, computers, smart devices, social media, etc. and have little to no control over it. For example, the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal is a saw the private information of millions of Facebook users being gathered and used for political means without the users' knowledge (Carrie). This prime example of the lack of control humans have over their privacy using technology and HAL's constant observation and ability to learn the crew's plan without their knowledge have a great comparison. In short, *Space Odyssey* does a very well job of showing the lack of control humans have over their privacy while using technology.

In addition to the lack of control humans have over their privacy using technology, *Space Odyssey* also shows that humans are forgetting important and basic skills with their increasing dependency on technology. In *Space Odyssey* the audience can see that HAL is a crucial part of the mission, even being considered a dependable member of the crew. All the operations of the ship are controlled by HAL and the entire crew relies on HAL for the mission to be effective and

successful. This dependency on HAL can be seen through many different scenes. For example, in a scene where HAL and Dr. Frank Poole play a game of chess, HAL informs Frank that he will be put into a forced checkmate in a few moves (*Space Odyssey* 1:06:04 – 1:06:50). However, HAL was incorrect and instead Frank could have forestalled checkmate (Mulkerin). Yet, since Frank was dependent on HAL's analysis, he was not able to see this possibility and instead resigned without questioning HAL's analysis. This scene is just a simple example of how humans are losing skills (i.e., chess) due to their dependency and trust over technology. In the current society, multiple studies have shown that basic but important skills such as navigation (using a map – a sense of direction), hand-writing and mental arithmetic are being replaced by pieces of technology such as GPS, keyboards and calculators (Ramasubbu). *Space Odyssey's* classical chess scene is a prime example of how the dependency on technology is causing humans to lose many of these basic and important skills.

In 1968, *Space Odyssey* was one of the unique movies, diving into the world of space. *Space Odyssey* presented the public with the reality of space travel and the wonders that space had to offer. *Space Odyssey's* HAL also had a major influence on the public's perception of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Nevertheless, if we take a look at *Space Odyssey's* HAL today, we can see how fifty-three years ago *Space Odyssey* managed to truly predict the dark truths of being dependent on technology in modern times. It managed to show why we should not be dependable on technology due to the threat that technology poses to human lives, the rapidly increasing lack of control humans have over technology and their privacy, and the effect technology has over important skills. When *2001: A Space Odyssey* was released in 1968, the directors had thought that space travel would be a common method of travel in the early-21st century (Rockmore). Yet, with the year being 2021, it seems that the directors might have made

a miscalculation. Nonetheless, the directors certainly deserve credit for being able to provide an accurate portrayal of the dangers of technology that are relevant today.

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