

**New York City College of Technology**  
**English Department**  
**ENG 1101 Final Examination**

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The New York Times

**When Your Boss Is an Algorithm**

By Alex Rosenblat

There are nearly a million active Uber drivers in the United States and Canada, and none of them have human supervisors. It's better than having a real boss, one driver in the Boston area told me, "except when something goes wrong."

When something does go wrong, Uber drivers can't tell the boss or a co-worker. They can call or write to "community support," but the results can be enraging. Cecily McCall, an African-American driver from Pompano Beach, Fla., told me that a passenger once called her "dumb" and "stupid," using a racial epithet, so she ended the trip early. She wrote to a support rep to explain why and got what seemed like a robotic response: "We're sorry to hear about this. We appreciate you taking the time to contact us and share details."

The rep offered not to match her with that same passenger again. Disgusted, Ms. McCall wrote back, "So that means the next person that picks him up he will do the same while the driver gets deactivated," — fired by the algorithm — because of a low rating or complaint from an angry passenger. "Welcome to America."

Over the past four years, I have traveled more than 5,000 miles in more than 25 cities, interviewing 125 drivers for Uber and other ride-hailing apps, as well as taxi drivers, and observing hundreds more. And I have spent countless hours in Facebook groups and other online forums for drivers, which collectively have 300,000 members, to better understand their experiences. I have learned that drivers at ride-hailing companies may have the freedom and flexibility of gig economy work, but they are still at the mercy of a boss — an algorithmic boss.

Data and algorithms are presented as objective, neutral, even benevolent: Algorithms gave us super-convenient food delivery services and personalized movie recommendations. But Uber and other ride-hailing apps have taken the way Silicon Valley uses algorithms and applied it to work, and that's not always a good thing.

The algorithmic manager seems to watch everything you do. Ride-hailing platforms track a variety of personalized statistics, including ride acceptance rates, cancellation rates, hours spent logged in to the app and trips completed. And they display selected statistics to individual drivers as motivating tools, like "You're in the top 10 percent of partners!"

Surge pricing, which multiplies prices for passengers and earnings for drivers during periods of high demand, is another form of algorithmic management that encourages drivers to relocate to

certain areas at certain times. The drivers get in-app notifications, heat maps and emails with real-time and predictive information about spikes in demand.

A driver who wants to go home and is trying to log out might be prompted with an automatic message: “Your next rider is going to be awesome! Stay online to meet him.” Some Uber drivers say they feel misled when they travel to a surge area in high demand only to find that it has disappeared. The consensus in driver forums is, “Don’t chase the surge.”

Other tools, like the rating system, serve as automatic enforcers of the nudges made by algorithmic managers. In certain services on Uber’s platform, if drivers fall below 4.6 stars on a 5-star rating system, they may be “deactivated” — never “fired.” So some drivers tolerate bad passenger behavior rather than risk losing their livelihoods because of retaliatory reviews.

Algorithms determine the news we see on Facebook and the search results we review on Google. And whenever we use a ride-hailing app, algorithms manage what we do as passengers, by controlling and manipulating the information we have about the price and location of available cars. (The car icons circling your location onscreen, for example, may not exist in real life. Uber has said its goal is to make the icons “as accurate as possible in real time.”)

Whether we realize it or not, algorithms are managing all of us.

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Alex Rosenblat is a researcher at Data & Society and the author of the forthcoming book *Uberland: How Algorithms Are Rewriting the Rules of Work*, from which this essay is adapted.

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Choose **A or B** and write a well-developed essay of about five paragraphs.

- A.** In the article “When Your Boss Is an Algorithm,” Alex Rosenblat describes how data and algorithms are used to manage Uber drivers and their passengers. Rosenblat writes, “Algorithms gave us super-convenient food delivery services and personalized movie recommendations.” Rosenblat also warns, however, that “the algorithmic manager seems to watch everything we do.”

Write an essay clearly expressing your opinion on this issue. Do you think this form of algorithmic management (where a computer watches everything you do) is oppressive, and does more harm than good? Or do you think society is ultimately better off because of this type of automated management?

Your essay must have a thesis, and you must quote at least once from the article “When Your Boss Is an Algorithm.” In addition, use details and examples from your own experience and/or from observations you’ve made about other people to illustrate your ideas. You may also refer to materials you’ve read or viewed to support your points.

- B.** In the article “When Your Boss Is an Algorithm,” Alex Rosenblat describes how “Uber and other ride-hailing apps have taken the way Silicon Valley uses algorithms and applied it to work, and that’s not always a good thing.”

Write an essay in which you discuss how automated technology has affected your own life. Have you ever felt that data, algorithms, and computers in general have exerted control over your life in ways that might not be healthy or desirable? Perhaps you have had a mixed experience when it comes to digital technology and surveillance (being watched).

Whatever your thoughts on this issue, use details and examples from your experience to reflect on the influence that data and algorithms have on your life, work, or relationships. Your essay must have a thesis, and you must quote at least once from “When Your Boss Is an Algorithm.” You may also explain why you agree or disagree with any of the opinions expressed in the article. In addition, feel free to refer to other materials you’ve read or viewed to support your ideas.