

# MACHINE-MADE HISTORIES – A PROVOCATION TO THOUGHT

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We live in an age of historical machines. Every day, messaging, online shopping or streaming services make recommendations about what we might write, buy, or watch. These recommendations are made on the basis of the past. What individuals and groups have written, bought, watched in the past is scoured for patterns by machines under more or less human supervision, and those patterns form the basis of what we see as ‘a recommendation for you’.

As recommendation systems have become ubiquitous, people have noticed that they are not always good. I don’t mean simply that technologies make poor or even funny recommendations to you. Recommendations can deny people loans, parole, passports, participation. This is not just a technology problem or an ethics problem. It is a history problem, and it needs to be understood as one if we are to make a good, fair or just world.

History makers choose what they want to tell us about the past, as writers like R. G. Collingwood and E. H. Carr taught us. Those choices are not just driven by needing to question what people said and did in the past, or by what is available in an archive, or to argue against another history maker. History makers tell us things about the past in order for us to think about how we ought to act now, and in future. That is a matter of ethics.

History makers are not recommendation systems. They find patterns, but they do not always recommend. We can go right back to Herodotus for this: he did not always choose between two or more accounts of the past. He did not choose because he did not have enough information. He did not choose because people described events using very different values. And history makers continue not to recommend today.

This makes histories hard work. Inconvenient. A nuisance, even. And ethically critical. History makers stop short of forming the next sentence, purchase, viewing choice for us. And they argue with one another. This is because they want us to make choices. To take responsibility for our own decisions and acts. To understand that the patterns of the past need not form the future through the slide of a finger or the click of a button.

This is the history needed in our machines. If you think history has nothing to do with technology, then I would like you to think again. And I need you to make better machines with me, driven by your journey to make a better, fair, and just world.

## History Extension classroom questions using the Machine-Made Histories thinking prompt

### Before reading

1. In what ways do you think machines are related to history? What about history making?
2. List as many machines as you can that are important in the study and writing of history.
3. What connections to the syllabus’ key questions can you make with machines, technology and history?
4. Do you have any examples of historians that have discussed the impact of technology on history?
5. Should digital history be studied by historians in a different way than non-digital history? Justify your response.

### After reading

1. In what ways do you think machines are related to history? What about history making? What has changed in your thinking?
2. Explain what Hughes-Warrington means by ‘historical machines.’
3. Highlight any words in the passage that are unfamiliar or difficult. Define each word and explain why they have been chosen to add meaning to the excerpt.
4. List the historians mentioned by Hughes-Warrington in the excerpt. What connections can you make between those mentioned?
5. Summarise the message of this excerpt in two sentences.
6. Select one paragraph of the excerpt – outline the key argument being made and how it links to any of the key questions in the History Extension syllabus.
7. What does Hughes-Warrington mean by ‘history makers are not recommendation systems?’
8. Justify the basis for Hughes-Warrington’s claim that histories are ‘ethically critical?’
9. What is the effect of the final paragraph of the passage? What is Hughes-Warrington asking the reader to do, and how is it different to the rest of the piece?
10. Research and read about the impact of algorithms and technology on our historical understanding. Record any interesting information or ideas and share with the class in your next lesson.