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### Cogs in The Machine: Our Nation's Youth

When did the National Anthem lose its bond with our nation's image? Almost every aspect of the American identity has evolved or been mutated since the Star Spangled Banner was first declared the National Anthem. It bolsters a nonexistent, red-white-and-blue-stained, unanimous patriotism for the world to see. Somewhere along the way we have forgotten what our anthem actually represents. For many, it stands only as a homage to the past, now merely a tradition. The National Anthem is long overdue for a replacement.

Delegating on what hokey jingoism should stand as a replacement would be futile. Why even have our ballad, if it is going to preach the same stale message as the prior? The American public has let the Star Spangled Banner put words in our mouths for too long. Not many people care, and perhaps this is the issue. What is so enthralling to contemporary America that we as a society cannot take the time to have a discussion anymore? People are being absorbed into the technological devices that are meant to enhance our lives, not lead them. One could take a step back and realize that our Anthem's reign over the American public reveals a much larger issue. The masses have lost touch with their agency. The United States National Anthem should be ejected, and superseded with a song of true substance. Our new anthem needs to directly speak to the future of this country, the youth. Radiohead's, "Kid A" would foil the illusion we have created and convinced ourselves of. Although technology has greatly advanced and connected our world, no one is posing the question, at what cost?

The global communication network has brought people together on a massive scale, and yet, people seem to feel more isolated today than ever before. In the article, *The Networked*

*Primate*, M.I.T. sociologist Sherry Turkle explains, “That technology means never having to feel alone or bored. Yet, ironically, it can make us less attentive to the people closest to us and even make it hard for us to simply be with ourselves” (Fischetti 1). Contemporary America is consumed by technology. My generation in particular, having grown up with it, are at the crux of the issue. *Kid A* encompasses the psychological and emotional repercussions of living in the technological age from the point of view of an adolescent, supposedly artificial intelligence. Brent DiCrescenzo, a music critique for Pitchfork magazine, praises *Kid A* saying, “This is an emotional, psychological experience. *Kid A* sounds like a clouded brain trying to recall an alien abduction” (DiCrescenzo). The vocals ache with unparalleled remorse and depression. The lyrics plead to be heard, while being drowned out by the hypnotic and apocalyptic instrumentation that forces listeners to drift into Radiohead’s world that is *Kid A*.

Radiohead’s fourth studio album, *Kid A*, was released on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2000. The album’s radically new direction shocked fans and critiques alike, proving to be their most discussed and divisive album ever. It eventually became recognized as an accidental masterpiece by listeners who allowed themselves to melt into the music and meaning. The unimaginable loneliness of *Kid A* connects with anyone that has ever experienced loss, anxiety, or uncertainty. The hopelessness conveyed through the tracks on *Kid A* are the direct result of the band’s visionary lead singer, Thom Yorke. He solely formulated the concept and lyrics for the album, while struggling to handle the burdens of fame, judgement, and ironically, writer’s block. One could glance at the stanzas of lyrics and see the track durations, and put together a preconceived idea of the monotony they will sit through. This exactly, is part of what makes the album, and the song from which it gets its title in particular, so perfect. For within the few compact lines of “Kid A”, lies

an emotional and societal statement brimming with complexities. The substance of the album is exhibited in “Kid A”’s lyrics:

I slip away  
 I slipped on a little white lie

We've got heads on sticks  
 You've got ventriloquists  
 We've got heads on sticks  
 You've got ventriloquists

Standing in the shadows at the end of my bed  
 Standing in the shadows at the end of my bed  
 Standing in the shadows at the end of my bed  
 Standing in the shadows at the end of my bed

The rats and children follow me out of town  
 The rats and children follow me out of town  
 Come on kids

Radiohead’s lyrics struggle for importance as the powerful percussion and synths overwhelm Yorke’s droid-like voice. The song’s opening hurtles the listener down into the crevices of somewhere unknown. A slow and soothing nursery rhyme comforts listeners while a kick drum progresses them to their destination; the recollections of the song’s main character, Kid A.

Many debates have arisen over the true message of the track, however the tone and inflection of Yorke’s character exemplifies how something is out of alignment. The lyrics are as vague as they are potent. The fragile male voice explains how he, or maybe it, went wrong by trusting something seemingly innocent or simple. Evident to Generation Z, the trusted lie was, and still is, that we benefit from technology without experiencing losses. Embedding anything into the fabric of our lives must have rippling consequences. Our society is notorious for fixing something only once the effects of such are blatantly obvious. The United States once thrived on the usage of slavery and producing the world’s tobacco supply. Hundreds of years later, we recognized our human rights violations as well as that smoking causes cancer. The speaker in

“Kid A”, is informed as to what caused the apocalypse; he is looking back on the mistakes of the past. Sherry Turkle invokes the same message of warning by stating, “It’s crucial to understand that this changing interaction is not just a story about technology. It’s a story about how we are evolving when we’re faced with something passive” (Fischetti 2). This eerie statement is elaborated on “Kid A”, when in the second stanza, Yorke’s persona voices his belief that others are to blame for his slew into chaos. He tells of how, using this lie, some entities of malice are able to coerce Yorke and his peers into being controlled by them. Peter H. Edwards, a writer for *Quadrant Magazine*, expresses his concerns with technology, writing, “While these amusements can bring emancipation from isolation for some, for others they have an unhealthy dominance over their lives, and make it dangerously easy to link up with people or organizations that are merely using them for their own purposes” (Edwards 1). From fake identities on chat rooms, to manipulative marketing companies, there are far too many children that fall victim to the effects of people’s self-interest through the use of technology.

The track “Kid A”, successfully defines just how invasive these ventriloquizing individuals are. The third stanza holds the most repetitive, as well as alarming, statement. It depicts how Yorke’s identity cannot sleep without this controlling entity watching over him. The voyeuristic scene described, is notably similar to the real environment of contemporary America. For instance, one can see similar relationships in that of the United States government and the American public. The Patriot Act gives the NSA the right to monitor the people’s every move. Perhaps the most chilling aspect of this correlation, is that the allusion made in the song takes place in a fictional reality, while ours shares many of its characteristics and yet, it is the real world.

The role of the masses in contributing to the growing influence of technology is often overlooked. In “Kid A”, the character focuses his reflection on other people who wronged him; the creators and administrators of the obsessions he was fixated on. For much of the song, he stands as a victim, not an enabler. Only in the fourth and final stanza, does Kid A admit his own faults, and realizes that he wants this controlling power to continue, just as much as those who he blamed before. Yorke compares himself to the Pied Piper, a man who rids a town of rats during the plague in exchange for payment, by playing a magical instrument. The Pied Piper then asks the town to pay for his services and they refuse, causing him to put the town’s children under the same trance as the rats, in which they follow him to their deaths. Kid A realizes how anything beneficial, can and will have negative consequences. Whether or not Yorke means to describe the user, Kid A, as the problem, he sheds light on how he was the one who fed into the illusion, and therefore is just as responsible. Even with this epiphany, Kid A is too far gone to change anything, so he merely perpetuates the problem.

The song “Kid A” is greater suited for our country than our current National Anthem. We no longer need to be beat over the head with our Nation’s sense of pride, and the constant reminder of the fight it took to survive. It is imperative that the youth of this country see the evils and limits that technology instills, instead of being blinded by the glamor and positives that it provides for us. Major psychological effects are already being found as a result. This year, The Child Youth Care journal published a study on adolescents and their addiction to technology. The study found that there was a direct correlation between the amount of time spent on the internet, and the level of existential anxiety, depression, and aggression exhibited by the children studied (Cyr, Berman, and Smith 89). The more we choose to buy into the integration of technology, the more we detach from our qualities of being human. If there is no limit to what

we allow to be automated, then what value is there in being human? No wonder adolescents who occupy the majority of their time online experience greater existential anxiety. One simply cannot obtain an understanding of who they are by only consuming what others say. Being human gives us the ability to be communicators, who contemplate, discuss, and question the nature of everything. It is not to be a vacuum for every spec of information that passes through our eyes and ears. The Kid A's of our country need to release the hold of technology before we ruin the basis of what it means to be human.

Works Cited

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