FYW Placement Exam
AY 2019-20
Discussion Questions

"Alexa, Should We Trust You?"
by Judith Shulevitz
The Atlantic, November 2018 issue

Before reading Shulevitz's article, what were your thoughts about AI and assistants like Alexa and Siri? Were you excited about the technological advances being made? Did you feel as though life was becoming easier by using these technologies, that things were becoming more convenient? Were you concerned about privacy/security? What about after reading Shulevitz's article? How have your opinions of, beliefs about, and/or relationships with these technologies changed as a result of reading the article?

Think about your relationship with artificial intelligence (AI) like Alexa and Siri, or the "space" Shulevitz contemplates these devices/program take up in your life – the physical space as well as the emotional. How do you use these "task assistants" in a regular day? Why do you choose to use them in this way, or why do you chose not to use them in others ways? What are the consequences (good and bad) of these choices?

Shulevitz ruminates on the ways in which advances in AI have changed our relationships with technology. She warns, "Perhaps you think that talking to Alexa is just a new way to do the things you already do on a screen: shopping, catching up on the news, trying to figure out whether your dog is sick or just depressed. It's not that simple." Instead, because of their ability to be human-like, to interact with users and learn from these interactions, Shulevitz acknowledges, "these devices no longer serve solely as intermediaries, portals to e-commerce or nytimes.com. We communicate with them, not through them." Think about the ways in which you "communicate with" the technology you use on a daily basis. Why do you think you have developed these practices? How do you think these practices are contributing to your formation as a person, to your habits and beliefs?

Much of what Shulevitz discusses in her article addresses her concerns about AI's ability to understand, elicit, mimic, and respond to human emotion. She gives examples of using software to gauge patient's emotional health during medical exams, to vent frustrations after a hard day at work, and to confess shameful secrets. Why do you think AI's ability to do these things worries Shulevitz? Do you share her concerns? Do you think she is over-reacting?

In addition to its influence with and over emotion, Shulevitz is concerned about the "existential threat" she fears our relationship with AI is causing. She questions how our use of these technologies may be changing our decision-making processes, our abilities to reflect, our creativity, and our opportunities for and attitudes toward solitude. How has the use of these technologies affected your processes? Have you suffered the consequences Shulevitz worries about? Have you experienced beneficial effects she is overlooking? Do the benefits or convenience of these technologies outweigh the possible detriments?