

The jobs of the future shall be more human

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In considering the future of work we should start by resisting the temptation of technological determinism. Of course, we can make specific predictions about certain tasks being made redundant by machines. For example, the progress being made by AI (Artificial Intelligence) in medical diagnosis almost certainly means doctors and other health professional will spend less time examining and appraising and will have more time for other tasks. What is much less clear is what those other tasks will comprise.

All health systems are under funding pressures as health needs rise, driven in large part by population ageing, but also expectations as more and more people aspire to live not just longer but healthier lives. The same diagnostic tools that reduce the burden of human labour could also increase the burden on health systems by enabling the earlier diagnosis of risks leading to the demand for expensive preventative interventions. New treatments may extend lives but also extend the period when people need expensive care. Health is one of the fastest growing occupational sectors in the global economy but the future of work in the sector will depend as much upon economics, politics and public expectations as technology.

So, the impact of technology will depend significantly on non-technological factors. But there is also less certainty about technology than we are sometimes led to believe. The first predictions that we were five years from ubiquitous driverless cars are now five years old, yet that future seems, if anything, further away. To address technological and social indeterminacy the RSA has worked with analysts at the engineering firm Arup to come up with four scenarios for the future of work:

- The **Big Tech Economy** describes a world where most technologies develop at a rapid pace, from self-driving cars to 3D printing. A new machine age delivers significant improvements in the quality of products and public services, with the cost of everyday goods including transport and energy plummeting. However, unemployment and economic insecurity creep upwards, and

the spoils of growth are offshored and concentrated in a handful of US and Chinese tech behemoths. The dizzying pace of change leaves workers and unions with little time to respond.

- The **Precision Economy** portrays a future of hyper-surveillance. Technological progress is moderate, but a proliferation of sensors allows firms to create value by capturing and analysing more information on objects, people and the environment. «Gig» platforms take on more prominence and rating systems become pervasive in the workplace. While some lament these trends as invasive, others believe they have ushered in a more meritocratic society where effort is more generously rewarded. A hyper connected society also leads to wider positive spillovers, with less waste as fewer resources are left idle.
- The **Exodus Economy** is characterised by an economic slowdown. A crash on the scale of 2008 dries up funding for innovation and keeps developed world economies in a low-skilled, low-productivity and low-paid rut. Faced with another bout of austerity, workers lose faith in the ability of capitalism to improve their lives, and alternative economic models gather interest. Co-operatives and «Mutuals» emerge in large numbers to serve people's core economic needs in food, energy and banking. While some workers struggle on poverty wages, others discover ways to live more self-sufficiently, including by moving away from urban areas.
- The **Empathy Economy** envisages a future of responsible stewardship. Technology advances at a clip, but so too does public awareness of its dangers. Tech companies self-regulate to stem concerns and work hand in hand with external stakeholders to create new products that work on everyone's terms. Automation takes places at a modest scale but is carefully managed in partnership with workers and unions. Disposable income flows into 'empathy sectors' like education, care and entertainment. This trend is broadly welcomed but brings with it a new challenge of emotional labour, where the need to be continuously expressive and available takes its toll.

An awareness that the future is unpredictable is not the only reason to resist technological determinism. Rhetoric such as 'the robots are coming for your job' and 'AI will replace us' is also disastrous politics. The current state of politics and public discourse in part reflects a reaction against the narrative of liberal globalisation which was dominant up to 2008. This narrative had a number of elements. Globalisation (particularly financial globalisation) was portrayed as an unstoppable force. It was assumed that as long as the economy grew those who lost out as a consequence of processes like offshoring would simply adapt. Similarly, it was argued that even if the price of globalisation included things we valued – like aspects of na-

tional sovereignty or a degree of social equity – this is inevitable and ultimately to be welcomed. And finally, that although financialization might seem complicated and sometimes even perverse, ordinary folk need not worry because it is guided by the logic of the market and overseen by clever financiers.

Things have certainly changed. We can't know how attempts to reverse globalisation will fare; the evidence so far of Trump and Brexit is that it is easier to talk about taking back control than actually doing it. But from the IMF to the OECD, most experts and observers see now that the case for globalisation has to be made in more humane and less hubristic terms.

Yet, listen to today's evangelists for the transformative power of technologies like social media, machine learning and robotics and you may recognise the tune. Technological change we are told is unstoppable. There will be many victims of change, but they must accept the inevitable because things will be better in the end. The price of technological progress may involve giving up things we care about – like privacy, control of our own data, protection of our children, the capacity to raise taxes – but this is a price we have to pay. Finally, technology is very complex but ordinary folk don't need to worry about it because it has its own logic and its implementation is being overseen by clever Californians who give money to good causes.

Is it surprising that the popular discourse about technological change is so often couched in terms of threat and disruption? It becomes all too easy to forget that the ultimate case for change must be that it improves the lives of human beings. That is why, both in my work for the UK Government and the research and action pursued by the RSA, I argue it is vital to start from a confident commitment to a future in which all work should be good work; fair, decent and with scope for development and fulfilment.

Properly deployed, technology can make our lives better and help us solve our most pressing problems. But if technology is to fulfil its potential and if the growing 'tech-lash' is to be resisted we must assert that the future will be determined by humans not machines.