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The Carnival of Venice





Technology

Could AI Steal Your Job



Don't be surprised to find a virtual assistant in your local store

Machinery, automation, robotics, artificial intelligence, call it what you will, man has always had an ambivalent attitude to technology. On the one hand, it can liberate us from mundane, laborious or even dangerous tasks, on the other hand; do we risk doing ourselves out of a job and digging our own grave?

Between 1811- 1816, textile workers, known as the Luddites, smashed up stocking frames and weaving machines in protest at the use of machinery to deskill their jobs and enable them to be done by cheaper labourers. While the protesters gained in number and spread from Nottingham to northern mill towns, the rebellion was brutally put down by owners and the government with deportation to penal colonies, executions or protesters simply being shot by owners. The term Luddite has become synonymous with someone who opposes technological advancement but their beef was not so much with the technology itself as with its impact on their job security and livelihoods. In a more recent altercation, the Wapping Dispute of 1986 saw Fleet Street printers dismissed and replaced by other workers operating new digital printing equipment. It was the final nail in the British unions' coffin, and the beginning of widespread automation and computerisation in the workplace in Britain.

We've got used to the idea of programmed robotic arms spraying cars and welding pieces together. We may even be coming round to the reality of drones in the Amazon warehouse picking up and transporting goods but could technology replace any job - surely not those with a strong human interface, like shop work for example? Wrong, it's already upon us. A self-checkout option in many supermarkets has been available for some time now but Amazon Go plans to go one better by doing away with assistants altogether. With smart stores featuring smart shelves that know when an item has been removed, and the aid of an app on your phone, you simply beep as you enter the store, take stuff off the shelves and drop it in your bag - job done. At the moment, it's something of a prototype but expect this to become a reality within just few years.

When was the last time you called customer services and got straight through to a real person? For English press 3, for all other enquiries press 4 - so that's telephone operators gone. What about the chirpy hotel receptionist telling you when breakfast is served and asking if you need an alarm call? Surely they are irreplaceable - wrong again. At the Henn-na Hotel in Sasebo, Japan you can

be greeted by a lifelike Japanese lady robot or bizarrely, an English speaking dinosaur. Pop out to the shops and in one Tokyo department store, you can catch up with ChihiraAico, a frighteningly authentic-looking shop assistant robot. Soon these clever little bots will be able to access your buying history and push personalised offers your way. They're always in a good mood and never complain, ask for a rise or take a day off. Go next door to a restaurant and there isn't a waiter or waitress in sight; food is delivered on conveyor belts.

According to Salary.com a whole host of other jobs is up for grabs. City centre drivers of buses and taxis will be one of the first to be pushed out of their seats as driverless vehicles become a regular sight - no more grumpy drivers, that's progress. If you've delighted in the mayhem of Gordon Ramsey's Kitchen Nightmares then enjoy it while you can. The kitchen of the future is likely to be populated by robotic commis chefs, chopping veg at lightning speed and cooking steaks to perfection, timed to nanoseconds. Probably in time, the robotic staff themselves will lose their jobs to be replaced by intelligent appliances that monitor the food's cooking progress with real-time computing, while sensors read the core temperature of the food. Who will be left for Gordon to swear at?

Business people fed up of forking out on accountants and lawyers will find solace in the new world order that will see the pricey professionals replaced by automated accounting and legal programmes. Who needs somebody who has studied for years when a computer can hold the entire legislature in its head, hosted of course on a cloud, and automatically updated with each new amendment?

Boston Consultancy Group estimates that by 2025, around 25 percent of current jobs will be farmed out to robots while Oxford University put the number at 35 percent within the next 20 years. It seems no job is beyond the reach of automation and AI and in theory, we will free up lots of our time for us to do more interesting things than working. Martin Ford, author of the Rise of the Robots, has a more apocalyptic view believing that by taking jobs away from people we risk mass unemployment, economic and social meltdown. The question is, without a job, how would we earn money and what would we do with it if we got it, but there's probably a programme to solve that conundrum too.



Discussion Point

Do you think that the development of artificial intelligence and robotics is helpful or a threat to the human way of life?

Vocabulary

Man - here: mankind, the human race

Ambivalent - holding two opposing views simultaneously

Mundane - uninspiring, boring

To do oneself out of something - to act in a way that removes a personal benefit

To dig one's own grave - to act in a way that leads to one's downfall

Stocking frame - mechanical knitting machine

Put down - here defeated, stopped

Penal colony - a distant place, often an Island, such as Australia, where prisoners were exiled

Beef - argument, dissatisfaction, point of dispute

Altercation - argument, dispute

Fleet Street - in London, historically the place where most of the daily national newspapers were produced

The final nail in the coffin - the last act or event that led to someone or something's end

To weld - to join together sheets of metal by heating

To go one better - to improve upon, to go one step further

To do away with something - to stop using or doing something

Job done - completed simply without fuss

Chirpy - cheerful and chatty

Up for grabs - available, open to competition

Grumpy - grouchy, in a miserable, unhelpful mood

Mayhem - chaos

Commis chef - a junior chef who carries out preparation tasks for other more senior chefs

At lightning speed - extremely quickly

Nanoseconds - .one thousand-millionth of a second

To fork out - to pay, often more than wanted and reluctantly

Find solace - find peace, compensation

To farm out - to outsource (but a more negative term, implying a lack of care)

Apocalyptic - describing or anticipating the total destruction of the world

Meltdown - disastrous collapse, often economic

Conundrum - puzzle, difficult problem.

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