Automation may mean a post-work society but we shouldn't be afraid

Machines could take 50% of our jobs in the next 30 years, according to scientists. While we can't predict the future, we can imagine a world without work – one where those who own the tech get rich from it and everyone else ekes out a living, propped up by an increasingly fragile state. Meet Alice, holder of the last recognisable job on Earth, trying to make sense of her role in an automated world. Read Paul Mason’s introduction to the film:

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To benefit from the automation revolution we need a universal basic income, the slashing of working hours and a redefinition of ourselves without work

When researchers Frey and Osborne predicted in 2013 that 47% of US jobs were susceptible to automation by 2050, they set off a wave of dystopian concern. But the key word is “susceptible”.

The automation revolution is possible, but without a radical change in the social conventions surrounding work it will not happen. The real dystopia is that, fearing the mass unemployment and psychological
aimlessness it might bring, we stall the third industrial revolution. Instead we end up creating millions of low skilled jobs that do not need to exist.

The solution is to begin to de-link work from wages. You can see the beginnings of the separation on any business flight. Men and women hunched over laptops and tablets, elbows so close that if it were a factory it would be closed on health and safety grounds.

But it is a factory, and they are working – some of the time. They flip from spreadsheet to a movie to email to solitaire: nobody sets a timer – unless in one of the time-hoarding professions like law. At the high skill end of the workforce we increasingly work to targets, not time.

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But to properly unleash the automation revolution we will probably need a combination of a universal basic income, paid out of taxation, and an aggressive reduction of the official working day. Typically, northern Europe is ahead of the curve: Sweden cut the working day to six hours, while Finland is experimenting with the idea of a basic citizen’s income.

The basic income has its proponents on the right as well as the left, with the former seeing it as a cut-price form of welfare. But its most useful contribution would come as a one-time subsidy for the rapid automation of the economy.

If that happens, it’s worth considering in detail how the technologies might interact. There’s a lot of focus on robotisation, with anthropomorphic white creatures now capable of disco dancing in unison. But the real potential of automation may lie in artificial intelligence, machine learning and self-healing systems.

In “the last job on Earth” animation, the worker Alice gets frustrated when the machine refuses to dispense her medicine. As society becomes increasingly automated we may well reach a point where real time epidemiology will use sensors to assess our health and tell our worker: you’re likely to get sick tonight, we put some medicine into the AC system of your home.

A low-work society is only a dystopia if the social system is geared to distributing rewards via work. In the early 19th century, the Utopian Socialists tried not only to imagine an alternative but to implement it, in slightly crazy closed communities inspired by the writings of philosopher Charles Fourier.

Fourier famously predicted work could become play – its qualities could absorb the qualities of aimlessness, humour, even eroticism. We would flit from one kind of work to another, oblivious of its productive function.
Marxism was founded on the rejection of this idea: anti-utopian socialism became focused on reducing work to a minimum while maximising free time.

Today, with all utopias based on work challenged by the possibility of its disappearance, the best you can say about the play versus work debate is: it’s complicated. Many of us work through a single handheld device which, on top of our contacts, emails, screenplays and so on contains much of our externalised self.

We can already see the self fragmenting, becoming “multichannel”, as networked communications eat into spaces like the dinner table, the shared bed, the otherwise hierarchical office.

The biggest enigma of the post-work society is what happens to the self when it cannot define itself against corporate identity, skill set or seniority. We’ll see.

See the video: The last job on Earth: imagining a fully automated world

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