

SUMMARY
BY ALYSSA BURNETTE

THE ROBOTS ARE COMING!

BY ANDRÉS OPPENHEIMER



Summary of “The Robots Are Coming!” by Andrés Oppenheimer

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How the advent of Artificial Intelligence is changing the job market for humans.

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Introduction

In an episode of the NBC comedy series *Superstore*, a group of employees at a big-box store are frightened when they receive a new cleaning robot. When the robot turns out to have the same name as one of the employees, the group correctly reads it as a threat indicating how easily they could be replaced. One character even remarks that robots never get tired and never need breaks and therefore are the perfect employee for a capitalist society. Robots can be overworked or pushed till their breaking point and then simply discarded or replaced with a newer, better model. Many corporations treat their human employees in this manner and-- so far from recognizing their blatant human rights violations-- seem annoyed when they're called on it. And although the big-box store depicted in the aforementioned series is fictional, it's an accurate representation of many modern companies who are embracing the arrival of artificial intelligence.

Unsurprisingly, many humans are afraid of new technology for the exact same reason. Although people would prefer not to be exploited or treated as automated cogs in a capitalist machine, this is often preferable to being unemployed. But unfortunately, many robots have been created that can do certain jobs better than their human counterparts. So, it leaves us wondering: are the robots really coming for our jobs? Are people becoming obsolete? What kind of jobs will be left for us in the future? Over the course of this summary, we're going to answer these questions and more!



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The Truth About Robots

People have been saying “the robots are coming for our jobs!” since the invention of the world’s most primitive forms of technology. Just take a look at the Luddites! Historian Evan Andrews observes that, “Luddite” is now a blanket term used to describe people who dislike new technology, but its origins date back to an early 19th-century labor movement that railed against the ways that mechanized manufactures and their unskilled laborers undermined the skilled craftsmen of the day. The original Luddites were British weavers and textile workers who objected to the increased use of mechanized looms and knitting frames. Most were trained artisans who had spent years learning their craft, and they feared that unskilled machine operators were robbing them of their livelihood. When the economic pressures of the Napoleonic Wars made the cheap competition of early textile factories particularly threatening to the artisans, a few desperate weavers began breaking into factories and smashing textile machines. They called themselves “Luddites” after Ned Ludd, a young apprentice who was rumored to have wrecked a textile apparatus in 1779.

The first major instances of machine breaking took place in 1811 in Nottingham, and the practice soon spread across the English countryside. Machine-breaking Luddites attacked and burned factories, and in some cases they even exchanged gunfire with company guards and soldiers. The workers hoped their raids would deter employers from installing expensive machinery, but the British government instead moved to quash the uprisings by making machine-breaking punishable by death. The unrest finally reached its peak in April 1812, when a few Luddites were gunned down during an attack on a mill near Huddersfield. The army had deployed several thousand troops to round up these dissidents in the days that followed, and dozens were hanged or transported to Australia. By 1813, the Luddite resistance had all but vanished. It wasn’t until the 20th century that their name re-entered the popular lexicon as a synonym for “technophobe.”

As we contemplate the future of modern technology, the legacy of the Luddites suddenly feels very timely and poignant. While facing the possible loss of our jobs, we have to ask ourselves if we are poised to become the Luddites of the future. But are we right to do so? Is the robot revolution simply overhyped? Are we merely being technophobes? The author believes that our fears are not unfounded and here's why: the onset of factories and big machines was only the beginning. It started with labor saving devices and then gradually moved on to artificial intelligence. These days, Alexa is a common addition to any household, along with a casual smart fridge, drone, and self-driving cars! And although self-driving cars are not yet commercially available, the author observes that many companies have invested in studies that will rush their availability to the mainstream market.

At first glance, that might sound incredibly cool. How awesome would it be to basically live in an episode of Star Trek or The Jetsons? But there is a dark side to the shiny new tech. (And no, not in an "evil robots take over the world!" sort of way). Instead, the negative side-effects will come in the form of thousands of lost jobs. After all, if self-driving cars are commercially available, we no longer need taxi drivers! Companies like Uber would quickly become obsolete, along with every local mini cab company. Yet, despite the fact that these innovations will decimate their employees' livelihoods, companies like Uber are aggressively pursuing the mass production of self-driving cars. Even pizza giants like Domino's and Pizza Hut are getting into the game and pursuing the possibility of replacing their delivery drivers with sentient delivery robots.

The same is true of companies like Amazon as well. The prevalence of online shopping has destroyed the market for brick and mortar stores. And with the onslaught of COVID-19, the job market is shrinking more than ever. Already, entire chains are going out of business. Others have closed a shocking amount of stores. For example, the popular pancake restaurant IHOP is so struggling so badly that customers can scarcely find a location in their area; all rural stores have been closed and the only remaining IHOPs are found in major metropolitan areas. The author observes that this may

soon be the case with many other popular chains as well, especially those that rely on customer service representatives, factory workers, and delivery drivers. Although you might initially assume that those jobs would go straight to Amazon, the author remarks that that isn't quite true. Instead, Amazon is also seeking to decrease their physical presence as well as the number of people they have on staff. By replacing its warehouse workers with fully automated robots and drones and replacing its delivery drivers with self-driving cars, Amazon might be fully automated by 2025!

But as if that isn't weird enough, your fast food experience might soon be almost completely electronic. If you live in a big city, you've probably already noticed that many McDonald's are testing out electronic ordering screens. These fully automated machines serve as both waiters and giant menus; you can place, customize, and complete your order without ever needing to talk to another human being. Your only moment of human interaction in these McDonalds' is when an employee quickly hands you your food. Given the popularity of these options (and the fact that their introduction has halved labor costs for many corporations), it's easy to imagine a future in which our restaurant experiences are fully automated. This not only creates a weird and sterile image of our dining experiences, it paints a stark picture for the young waiters and waitresses who will soon be out of a job.

This reality makes the episode of the fictional comedy Superstore scarily relevant and proves that most companies are indeed eager to replace their workers with automated counterparts that don't need pay checks or health care.



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Will Creative Careers Survive?

From the examples discussed in the previous chapters, we can plainly see two things: first, it is readily apparent that the robots are indeed coming for our jobs. More and more major corporations are investing in technology that will convert a number of jobs to automated functions. And secondly, we can see that retail and service careers will likely be the first to go. But what about creative careers? Could robots make them obsolete as well? According to the author's research, the answer is both yes and no. No robot will ever be able to duplicate the unique power and ingenuity of a human brain. And it is highly unlikely that we will ever teach robots to write poetry, perform plays, or dance an intricate ballet.

But even if creative careers are more likely to survive, the same might not be said for other seemingly immovable positions. In college, we often hear such advice as "Be a doctor-- you'll always have a job!" or "The world will always need accountants!" But with the rise of artificial intelligence, even these positions may not be safe. In fact, the author remarks that careers in the financial sector will likely be the next to go after retail, factory, and delivery jobs. And as we contemplate the prevalence of online banking, it's not hard to imagine! After all, we can conduct almost all of our financial transactions through an app on our phone. It seems we only ever speak to a human being when a technical error has made it absolutely necessary. And our future might simply be a more extreme version of this, with supercomputers replacing the investment bankers and financial analysts on Wall Street.

Fortunately, however, doctors might not be quite so obsolete. Instead, the author theorizes that artificial intelligence will simply evolve as a convenient aid to medical professionals. For example, cutting edge technology might improve our ability to perform complicated, life-saving surgeries. Likewise, robots might become useful assistants in the fields of data entry, remote diagnoses, and self-monitoring. In fact, we already do a great deal of these things electronically! Just think about your FitBit.

Although you probably don't think about it as a "robot," your FitBit is a little piece of technology that monitors your body's health and gives you a little report. It's kind of like having an automated doctor with you-- and soon, it might advance to collect more important, more helpful data.

In this case, however, the author observes that advancements in technology may be truly beneficial. If our doctors are no longer required to waste time on mundane tasks that can be completed by robots, they will be freed up to pursue new research, explore experimental treatments, and forge a genuine connection with their patients! The latter point brings us to a fleeting note of hope: the fact that the value of a human touch will never be obsolete. Although it might be useful for a robot to perform some basic data entry, we will never want a robot to give us a hug or break the news that we have terminal cancer. The same is true for therapists and other mental health professionals. Although advances in technology might help us obtain more accessible mental health care through the form of teletherapy, the good news is that machines will never replace therapists altogether. In fact, for all moments that require genuine human connection, we will always need human beings and we need not fear the loss of these jobs, particularly in the healthcare profession.



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Final Summary

“The robots are coming for our jobs!” has often been painted as the fear-mongering cry of the Luddite. However, the author asserts that our fears are neither unfounded nor unwise. The robots are indeed coming for our jobs; current advancements in technology are already living proof. With the advent of Alexa, drones, self-driving cars, and automated touch screens at restaurants, we can easily imagine a future in which many jobs are now automated. And although new innovations in science and technology are exciting, this future is also a harbinger of devastating unemployment rates to come. Unfortunately, this will be primarily true for service industries such as retail, delivery drivers, and factory workers. By contrast, however, the author’s research indicates that creative careers and all elements of the medical profession will continue to thrive while reaping the benefit of technological advancements.



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