**Will AI replace humans?**

Marwan Bishara

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This Labour Day, working people around the world have little to celebrate. Amid climate change, war and pandemics, inequality is rising, wages are stagnating or even falling, and inflation is skyrocketing, leaving billions of people struggling to make ends meet.

In France, where in 1889 labour unions and socialists first designated May 1 as International Workers’ Day, hundreds of thousands are demonstrating against a pension law raising the retirement age to 64.

However, the sad fact is that many of these workers out on French streets and throughout the world today may not have a job at all come retirement. The speed with which automation and artificial intelligence (AI) are replacing humans in the workplace is breathtaking and poses an unprecedented risk of major economic disruptions and social upheavals.

In 2017, the international consulting firm, McKinsey estimated that between 400 and 800 million jobs could be lost to automation by 2030. And in 2019, the Brookings Institution concluded that some 36 million, or a quarter of the American workforce, may be replaced by robots.

Today, AI seems to threaten white-collar middle-class workers as much as – if not more than – blue-collar workers.

The applications of AI go beyond driverless cars and automated retail cashiers to take on financial accounting, medical diagnosis, legal documentation, graphic design, 3-D printing, text and film editing, commercial art and design and hundreds of other tasks.

And as with previous technological advances that ultimately benefitted capital more than workers, AI will enable a few patent holders and investors to enter the 1 percent club of other hi-tech and finance billionaires, while millions go poor.

But it cannot be all that bad! It mustn’t!

To provide some “balance” to this dramatic scenario, I asked the AI chatbot, ChatGPT, for its take on how AI will affect human labour, but was told that it has no “take” on it per se. Instead, it went on to cite and summarise various reports, rather generically and somewhat conservatively.

It listed the main pros and cons for the economy, suggesting that a higher number of jobs may be created if businesses and governments joined hands and invested more in education and training.

The new technological revolution will certainly have positive ramifications and is already transforming our lives like never before. It will improve productivity, create new more sophisticated jobs and speed up the search for solutions to various problems of healthcare, climate change, finance, transport, etc. And, it will take on the tedious tasks that no one wishes to do, and do them even more efficiently, requiring no lunch or coffee breaks.

But then again, how will millions of families survive at all, let alone prosper, in the shadow of all these innovations, when their breadwinners lose their jobs?

Unsatisfied, I probed ChatGPT further, asking for a more genuine, even witty and sarcastic take on this “complex issue”. To my surprise, after few back-and-forths, it responded to the effect that AI is bound to replace human jobs faster than the Kardashians replace boyfriends.

Hmmm! The response was a bit too American for my taste, but it was right.

Job replacement is inevitable and will proceed at a high pace. In fact, AI has already begun to disrupt the labour market and is sure to create a major surplus of labour and exacerbate income inequality. Disruption is the key word here.

As human civilisation, we must avoid at all costs hyper-automation that leads to the utter destruction of the labour market. Not only are humans needed to run, guide, and, yes, humanise all industries, but also surrendering any economy to a fast-learning, autonomous “divine-like” digital intervention is sure to bring on the apocalypse.

That is why ethical and legal oversight and management of AI systems are paramount, and must go hand-in-hand with creative national solutions to preempt a major labour catastrophe that are bound to lead to major social and political upheavals and widespread violence.

Preemption is also the key word here. Because even though solutions may be found and jobs eventually created, timing is of the essence to avoid calamity.

Already, a couple of obvious remedies have been suggested, such as investing in better education, training and retraining for workers who will handle more sophisticated operating systems as well as new occupational tasks. But with governments preoccupied by pandemics, war and inflation, and corporations falling behind on training and preparation, there has been little or no real national or international effort to avoid a human redundancy disaster.

This must change. Fast.

Another interesting remedy could be ‘universal basic income’, which would see governments distributing a minimum monetary handout to everyone to help them sustain a decent standard of living.

Excerpted: ‘I asked an AI chatbot about AI replacing humans’.

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