

A sticky situation: Part 3: Automation, Covid-19 and the Utopia of unemployment

By  Edward Herridge

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In [Part 1](#), I took a look at the genre of apocalyptic entertainment being popular because it accesses an atavistic fear of technology that mushroomed into the human subconscious. In [Part 2](#), I looked at how our brains will mean that we simply would not be able to think fast enough. In my conclusion, I look at automation, Covid-19 and the Utopia of Unemployment.



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Let's move away from the ephemeral future and focus on the concrete present. Things do not seem much better here folks. During the Covid-19 pandemic automation boomed and the 2% saw their fortunes grow between 20 to 30% while the average person experienced the opposite.

Why did this happen? Because all the money is in technology today folks, and technology is what stepped in to fill the gaps when the world was forced into quarantine. Before the pandemic almost nobody used applications like Teams, but during its use skyrocketed.



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It was also during this period that companies like Amazon, who had already committed heavily towards automation, invested even further in such technologies. In effect Covid-19 accelerated automation and the adoption of technologies that will supplant labour drastically.

Soon cars and trucks will also be driving themselves, and it is not a leap of the imagination to speculate that steering wheels will become a thing of the past soon after. If they could make you wear a safety belt with an annoying beep and the threat of fines, to ensure your safety and that of others, do not think for a moment that it won't be a simple matter to remove the steering wheel from your car to achieve the same.

If we do somehow manage to stave this eventuality off you can bet your bottom dollar that the massive insurance fees you will be forced to pay, if you insist on driving yourself, will soon convince you into further passive submission. Laws have already been passed that punish drinking and driving with severe penalties, and it is not too far-fetched to speculate that in this self-driving-car future punishment for accidents under the influence of a driver would receive the same consideration.



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This leads us to the most important question of this narrative, what will happen when our machines and computers do all our tasks and thinking for us and we are effectively no longer needed while the system effectively runs itself?

Universal basic income, the abdication of ownership without resulting discomfort and a digital only global fiat currency are the solutions currently being offered in trade for the purpose and liberty that gainful employment offers our lives today. Just like the communist manifesto all of these pie in the sky solutions look great on paper, but unfortunately people will be running the system and people do not have a great track record with handling absolute power. Things tend to go awry more often than not. The only solution left would be to let the AI run the show. Naturally utopia will follow.

Doom, gloom and pessimism

But enough with the gloom and doom. Now that I have sufficiently cautioned you on the dangers of our emerging technocracy it is time for me to return to the stick that became a lever. As dystopian as our future might seem right now it is important not to get mired in pessimism. More often than not, regardless of the supporting evidence, our fears tend not to materialise. I will once again haul out Oppenheimer to support my nugget of wisdom. He only saw death and destruction in his creation because at that moment he could only see it for the stick that it was.

Fortunately Oppenheimer's stick has over time become a lever on which this world had mostly pivoted towards a brighter future. Hopefully we have learned from Nagasaki and Hiroshima and this time around we will not need to deploy the tools of our mass destruction before fully realising and mitigating their danger. Make no mistake, the current trajectory of unchecked technological development will be terminal to our species.

Loathe as I am to seem a Luddite, I must champion caution at this juncture. I am not saying burn the looms, we need the fabric they provide. I am saying don't make them so smart that they tear the fabric of our civilisation to threads. And this is where I will conclude my dissertation on the looming threat of technology with a Disney reference.

Fantasia, Mickey Mouse and sleeping on the job

Remember *Fantasia*? Remember the brooms. What is a broom but a stick with bristles at one end? Remember Mickey enchanting them to do his menial tasks for him? How did that work out at the end?

Watch that scene in the movie again, but this time imagine those brooms to be the intelligent technologies that we are employing to perform our tasks for us.

What will happen when we fall asleep like Mickey had? Would we end up in the same sticky situation as he did? The future is not decided.

The decisions we make today will create our tomorrow but unfortunately, judging by the look of things now, that tomorrow is going to mostly involve sleeping while the magic brooms do all our work for us.

ABOUT EDWARD HERRIDGE

Edward matriculated in 1992 after which he performed military service and began his working career in printing by studying electronic origination at the South African Printing College. Edward eventually became an account executive for Oakes and Associates at Investec Bank. He then migrated into advertising and became brand manager for Ronin Grain Management Solutions. Edward departed Ronin GMS to pursue his own interest before finding employment at Grey advertising as a finishing artist, re-toucher, motion graphic and digital designer.

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