

Abstract of Speech

“Work, Wealth and a Decent Life: How Technology Will Change the Meaning of Work”

You don't have to believe that robots will take all the jobs, or that we are heading for massive technological unemployment, to be concerned about the future of work.

Technology may not displace humans completely, or even a majority of them, but that doesn't mean that technological displacement of human labour is not happening, or that it won't have a massive effect on the pay and conditions of whatever jobs remain.

Those who insist that all talk of robots taking jobs is wildly exaggerated tend to gloss over this reality. We should be wary of anyone who tells us not to worry, that there will always be plenty of jobs.

Perhaps there will be, but that doesn't mean work as we know it will not fundamentally change.

At the very least, the effects of change will be uneven. Various areas, regions, countries, towns, and cities will be affected differently. Some will prosper, others will suffer. There will certainly, at the very least, be

a long period of transition and uncertainty, and there is absolutely no guarantee that those who lose old jobs will get the new jobs that happen to emerge.

Under such circumstances, it is foolish to completely dismiss the displacing power of the new technologies and the way in which they are fundamentally reshaping the economy. And yet many people remain in denial about all this.

Indeed, most public discussion of the future of work reduces the matter to a single question: Will a robot take my job? This has always been a bad question, no matter what answer you provide, whether in the affirmative or the negative. The question is simply too reductive. It leaves too much out of the discussion.

In this talk, therefore, I will argue that the future of work isn't just about the sorts of jobs we do, but the very nature of work itself. The new technologies of the information age are blurring the line between work and leisure, between home and the workplace, and they are using our own labour to extract data from us without compensating us for this labour. They are then using this data to surveil us and to build the biggest fortunes in human history. This exploitation cannot continue. It is fundamentally anti-democratic, and I will talk about how we might respond to these changes in order to be able to live a decent life.

