

Are cashpoints an example of ‘job-stealing’ automation?

Behind the attention-grabbing headlines about the threats that automation and robots pose to jobs, is a disturbing misunderstanding of what automation actually entails. Victoria Montag, Gambica’s sector head* for industrial automation, worries that this misunderstanding is making it harder to argue the case for genuine automation.

Recently, the ONS (Office for National Statistics) released a report on the impact that automation is likely to have on jobs market – specifically on the types of job that are most at risk of being replaced by automation.

As these things often do, the publication of the report made its way onto the BBC News Web site with the headline:

“Automation could replace 1.5 million jobs, says ONS”. It was no surprise that the BBC took a negative angle. Even studies that show a positive link between automation and employment (as most do), tend to be reported from a negative angle.

For example, last summer, *The Guardian* chose the headline: “More than 6 million workers fear being replaced by machines”, when reporting a Fabian Society survey of workers’ views and expectations about technology change at work. This survey actually concluded that workers are, on the whole, very positive about the impact technology will have on their jobs.

conversation with the public, media and government about automation and the impact it will have on employment and jobs – a conversation that needs to be had, especially when we talk about future education and skills needs – and it turns out there is a woeful lack of understanding of what automation actually is. I am used to having to explain to friends and family that self-service checkouts are not examples of automation, nor, for that matter, is asking Alexa to turn on your living room lights. But to see the ONS, a government agency, not only fall for this base misconception, but also defining pretty much any technology as

“Here I am, trying to have an adult conversation with the public, media and government about automation and the impact it will have on employment and jobs, and it turns out there is a woeful lack of understanding of what automation actually is.”



So, by now well-accustomed to this “Automation/machines/killer robots will take your job” trope, I steeled myself and clicked on the BBC link.

This news item peeved me more than usual. It included the following definition from the ONS – “automation involves replacing tasks currently done by workers with technology, which could include computer programs, algorithms, or even robots”. This raised an eyebrow. I thought to myself that this must just be sloppy wording from a spokesperson, given that, by that definition, a cashpoint would be an example of “automation”.

But they meant it, and the quote was lifted directly from the report. I almost wept with despair as I read: “For instance, self-checkouts at supermarkets are now a common sight, reducing the need to have as many employees working at checkouts”.

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automation, is particularly egregious.

It is clear that it will always be an uphill battle to change the narrative around automation in the media. One assumes that the *Guardian* journalist had read the Fabian Society’s report before writing their article, so when they wrote their incredibly misleading headline, they knew that the survey respondents viewed technology favourably. And in fact, the ONS report, if one took time to read it, concluded that the threat to jobs from technology was actually receding.

These tech-bashing headlines have been around since the days of the Luddites. I suppose a positive spin just isn’t a good story. I always knew this would be a challenge for me, but one that I do not think insurmountable. What I hadn’t counted on was that the basic level of understanding of automation in government and media is perhaps lower than I realised. It seems my job just got that much harder! ■