

Martin Ford: Robots could make entire industries redundant, warns Silicon Valley entrepreneur

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Photo: Martin Ford warns the rise of robot technology could trigger economic and social collapse if not managed correctly. (ABC News: Patrick Williams)

Silicon Valley entrepreneur and author Martin Ford has warned that the advancement of robot technology could make entire industries redundant, and that we need to start preparing for the global shock this jobless future could deliver.

Ford predicts that the latest wave of technological change could trigger economic and social collapse if not managed correctly.

"It's not just about doing manual labour as it was in the past," he said.

"Now we've got robots and machines and algorithms that are taking over brain power and it's much more broad-based, it's ubiquitous.

"These technologies are everywhere; they're going to invade every industry across the board."

Ford is in Sydney for the Festival of Dangerous Ideas.

In his new book, *The Rise of the Robots: Technology and the Threat of a Jobless Future*, he warns that income will accrue to the small number of wealthy people who can afford to own the machines.

"It will get worse and worse and what that means is that you'll have fewer and fewer people that really have the means to thrive and you'll have fewer and fewer consumers out there to buy the products and the services that are produced, so that's sort of a recipe for a downward spiral."

If a jobless future is to look more like a utopia, Mr Ford says humans need to formulate a contingency plan.

"The one that I advocate in the book that I think makes the most sense is that eventually we're going to have to move towards some sort of a guaranteed minimum income so that everyone, regardless of whether they can find a traditional job or not, will have access to at least a decent income in our society."

Here are four key areas where Ford predicts robots could take over:

LAW

"One good example is the field of law, where we now have what are called e-discovery algorithms and what they're taking on is this specific area of law that involves reviewing documents for court cases and figuring out which ones are relevant and important.

"The technology that's sort of central to this, the thing that's really driving it, is machine learning, and this is the ability of algorithms to churn through data and based on that, learn from it, and figure out how to do things for themselves."

MEDIA

"There are smart algorithms that generate news stories that are taking over at least basic journalism and there are some really major media companies that now rely quite extensively on these algorithms - some of them don't like to disclose that.

"These are systems that can produce stories in areas like financial reporting and sports reporting and they're getting better and better.

"It's not just simply a matter of plugging numbers into some formulaic report, they already have the capability to analyse data and figure out what's interesting and weave it into a pretty compelling narrative that's comparable to what a human being could do."

FAST FOOD

"There's a sort of a fast food sushi chain in Japan that uses lots of automation.

"They've got conveyor belts that deliver the sushi, they've got robotic cutters, so they really eliminated a lot of the labour and as you say, sushi is, in many ways considered to be almost an art form.

"It's very different from hamburgers for example, and yet even here you see that, so I think that really is a pretty good predictor of how a lot of the fast food industry especially is going to evolve," Mr Ford said.

CREATIVE ARTS

"There is definite research into what are called creative machines and they are writing symphonies, there's a system that can paint original works of art.

"Again, that kind of upends one of our basic assumptions about all of this which is that if you're creative then you'll be safe, right, but one of the basic rules of this is that you can never say never."

SO WHAT'S NEXT?

"People worry about real artificial intelligence, are the machines going to wake up and take over.

"There are some very high profile people warning about that - you heard Stephen Hawking for example warning about it recently.

"The leap between where we are now and a machine that can become conscious and genuinely think the way a human being thinks is quite a quantum leap, but if it does happen, as Stephen Hawking has said, it will be maybe the biggest thing that has happened in human history."

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-10-20/australian-ai-expert-calls-for-ban-on-killer-robots-at-un/6868834>

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