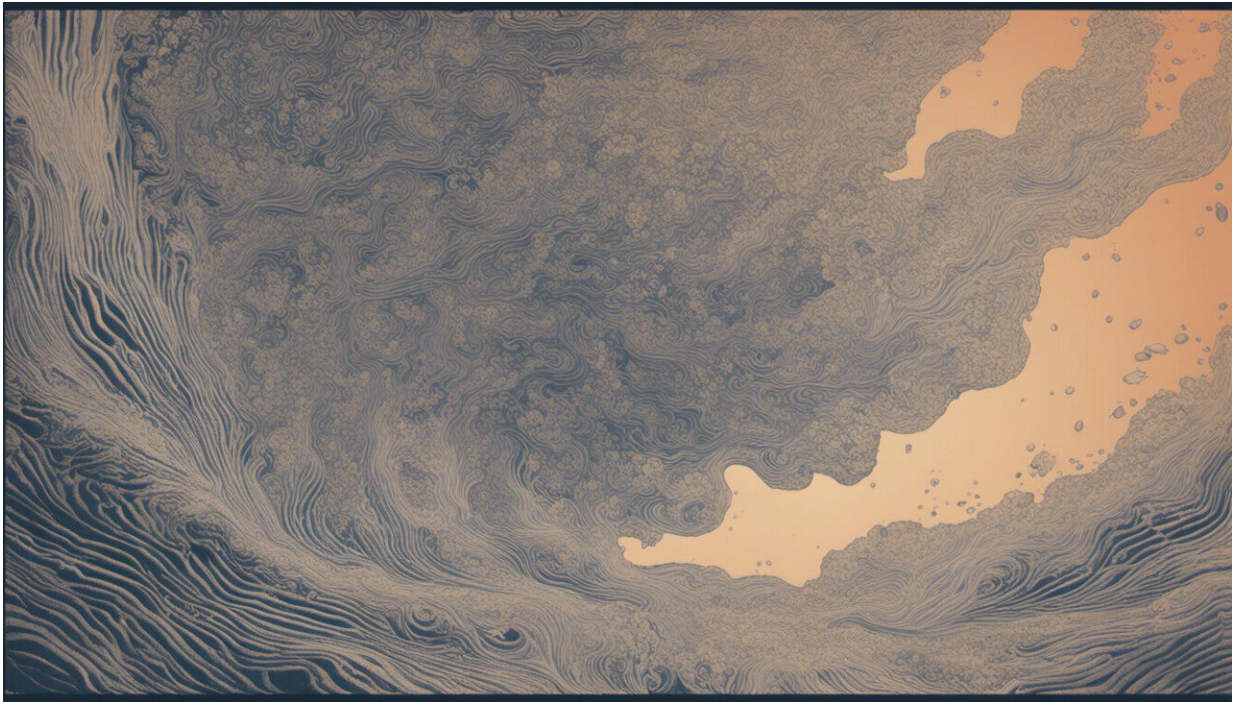


Yes, AI may take some jobs – but it could also mean more men doing care work

September 13 2018, by Katharine Mckinnon



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

It's now generally accepted that as [artificial intelligence \(AI\) advances](#) into fields of work that were formerly considered skilled labour, a huge number of manual and white collar jobs are [likely to disappear](#).

These are the kinds of jobs that require learning and applying patterns,

unemotional calculation and mechanistic problem solving. Think: medical diagnosis, legal contracts and engineering.

Guardian columnist Simon Jenkins [recently suggested](#) AI will free us up to focus on the caring work uniquely suited to humans.

Currently much care work is low paid, unpaid or invisible – and [mostly done by women](#). It requires creativity, empathy, relationship building, and emotional and spiritual labour. I argue the advent of AI has the potential to herald a revolution in how care work is valued in society, and ensure this kind of work is spread more evenly across genders.

Care work underpins our economy

Market democracies may prioritise economic growth, but [care is at the core](#) of what makes us human.

Economists might assume that we are all homo economicus (individuals who maximise rational utility), but we could also be cast as [homines curans](#) (humans who care).

Political science professor Joan Tronto [describes](#) care as: "a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web."

Care is the work that builds and sustains this web. It's done within families to provide the basic needs of life. It nurtures children, supports the elderly, and supplies the "[emotional labour](#)" needed to keep households going.

But care work also happens in professional life – and not just the care

professions of nursing or childcare.

Administrative tasks that [support the collective efforts](#) of university departments are one example. Doing the dishes in the tea room is another. More important is the daily work of building community and mutual support, fostering our [being-in-common](#).

In the home and workplace, it's care work that attends to the social relations underpinning institutions and organisations, farms and marketplaces, offices and factory floors. Without this largely invisible and unpaid care work, the economy would not function.

As Yale anthropologist James Ferguson [notes](#): "the receipt of unconditional and unearned distribution and care must always precede any productive labour."

In other words, care comes first. Without it we wouldn't be unable to function as organisations, manage our farms, run our factories, or participate in any kind of waged labour.

Robots can't care

Care work is not well suited to new technologies. It requires empathy.

While AI can [mimic](#) human emotions, it's a long way off from being able to [genuinely empathise](#). Robot empathy is based on deceit: it can make you think it cares in order to shape your emotional responses. For ethicist [Rob Sparrow](#), that also means it's fundamentally unethical to rely on robots to provide care.

But if AI takes over the task-based and calculative work that people now do, could the essential, largely feminised, work of care begin to be more valued?

There are some signs this could happen.

The business world is paying more attention to the importance of [empathy in the workplace](#). [Research](#) reveals the diversity of contemporary economic practices beyond capitalism, and is showing us how much of our economy is reliant upon putting care first.

Around the world, examples of [community economies](#) – livelihood practices that actively build and sustain communities rather than seeking profit – are changing economic systems.

In [academia](#) and the [not-for-profit](#) sector, new organisational structures are being shaped around appreciation for the whole human being, with collaboration not competition as the defining mode of interaction.

These examples demonstrate the possibility of reconfiguring our economies towards a future where an ethics of care comes first.

Lessons from the global south

As we anticipate a new definition of the uniquely human skills people bring to the workplace, it's worth drawing on the knowledge of societies that place more value on community networks and interpersonal relationships than western culture does.

When asked to talk about their livelihoods, [gender equity](#) and their aspirations for the future, women and men in the Pacific [focus on relationships](#). What concerns them most is the ability to contribute to community, to share what they have, and for the different contributions of women and men to [be given equal value](#).

We can learn from this.

As robots and AI "[take our jobs](#)", the [care work](#) that underpins all workplaces – and homes, and schools, and communities – ought to come to the fore. This would offer a long overdue corrective for our love affair with the rational, utility-maximising individual – and provide opportunity and motivation for more men to shoulder a greater share of the load.

Realising we are more homines curans than [homo economicus](#) gives us a chance to properly value the [care work](#) that's at the heart of our economies.

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