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 Donna Ferguson

When Elinor O'Donovan found out she had been randomly selected to participate in a basic income pilot scheme, she couldn't believe her luck. In return for a guaranteed salary of just over €1,400 (£1,200) a month from the Irish government, all the 27-year-old artist had to do was fill out a bi-annual questionnaire about her wellbeing and how she spends her time. "It was like winning the lottery. I was in such disbelief," she says.

The income, which she will receive until September 2025, has enabled her to give up temping and focus instead on her art. "It covers my living expenses, my rent, food and day-to-day stuff."

The concept of a guaranteed basic income might seem novel or neoteric, but it dates back to 1795, when the American founding father Thomas Paine suggested a "national fund" should pay every adult "rich or poor" a "ground rent" of £10 a year until the age of 50. Earth is "the common property of the human race", he argued, so everyone has been collectively dispossessed by "the introduction of the system of landed property" and was entitled to compensation.

Today, as artificial intelligence (AI) learns from the collective intellectual and creative output of humans and uses this to dispossess workers of their livelihoods, the idea of universal basic income (UBI) as a possible solution is gaining traction. "We are seeing the most disruptive force in history," Tesla founder and X (formerly Twitter) owner Elon Musk said last year, before speculating: "There will come a point where no job is needed – you can have a job if you want one for personal satisfaction – but AI will do everything."

Darrell West, *author* of *The Future of Work: AI, Robots and Automation*, says that just as policy innovations were needed in Thomas Paine's time to help people transition from an agrarian to an industrial economy, they are needed today, as we transition to an AI economy. "There's a risk that AI is going to take a lot of jobs," he says. "A basic income could help navigate that situation."

AI's impact will be far-reaching, he predicts, affecting blue- and white-collar jobs. "It's not just going to be entry-level people who are affected. And so we need to think about what this means for the economy, what it means for society as a whole. What are people going to do if robots and AI take a lot of the jobs?"

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