

UK is ill-equipped to protect workers against pitfalls of AI

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Rishi Sunak will gather world leaders in London this autumn for a summit on safety in artificial intelligence, after expressing concern about the “existential risks” of the rapidly evolving technology. Apparently, even our wannabe tech bro prime minister – currently holidaying in California – is willing to acknowledge the potential need for state intervention to prevent AI going rogue. But away from the level of jet-setting diplomacy, his government has been notably less keen on scrutinising the dramatic transformation already being wrought in many people’s working lives by digital technologies. A new report on “connected tech” published by the culture, media and sport select committee underlined the immense potential of the so-called “fourth Industrial Revolution” for a wide range of sectors. But it also pointed to the risks for individual workers, where aspects of their job are automated out of existence, or they find themselves so closely monitored that they lose any sense of autonomy. Amazon proudly told the committee that the use of tech in its fulfilment centres had “reduced the physical burden on employees, reducing walking time and taking on repetitive tasks, and freed them up to focus on more sophisticated tasks beyond the scope of automation”. Yet Amazon employees have made clear that the arrival of hi-tech monitoring in their working lives has not come as a blessed relief from monotony, but has led to a grinding intensification of their jobs. Far from being freed up by robots, they feel they are increasingly being expected to measure up to them. And the potential impact extends well beyond the warehouse: recent iterations of generative AI are already being put to use in a wide range of fields, not just monitoring or directing workers, but remaking their roles altogether. Dr Matthew Cole of the Oxford Internet Institute warned the select committee that “technological transformation would probably lead to a change in task composition and a deskilling of many roles as complex tasks are broken up into simpler ones to allow machines to perform them”. And unlike consumers who can decide for themselves whether or not to install a smart speaker or an internet-enabled fridge, workers’ contractual relationship with their employer makes it harder to opt out. Mulling the question of hi-tech workplace surveillance, the committee alights on a principle that has also been espoused by trades unions: “The monitoring of employees in smart workplaces should be done only in consultation with, and with the consent of, those being monitored.” That is what has ultimately happened at Royal Mail, where the CWU union and management have now agreed limits on how the data collected by handheld tracking devices for posties can be used, after clashing publicly over the issue before a separate parliamentary committee earlier this year. But away from the glare of parliament, unions and campaigners have repeatedly resorted to using privacy legislation – the GDPR regime that originated in the EU – in the face of hi-tech employment practices over which there has been little or no consultation. Uber drivers took the ride-hailing service to

court over facial ID technology they regarded as discriminatory. Just Eat drivers have used subject access requests to try to discern why they have been chucked off the app. Campaigners argue that the government's new, post-Brexit GDPR regime offers weaker safeguards for workers, and question why they are having to use data protection law to tackle what are essentially employment disputes in the first place. The culture, media and sport select committee suggests the government should "clarify" the role of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) in policing the use of surveillance technologies – but that seems quite a stretch from the watchdog's traditional role. And hi-tech surveillance of staff is just one aspect of the complex transformation under way in many workplaces, often with little scrutiny or redress. As the committee makes clear, there are immense potential benefits from this latest Industrial Revolution – to workers as well as their bosses and the wider economy. But there are significant pitfalls too, which current employment protections appear ill-equipped to avert.