

Human Interaction Is Now a Luxury Good



In part of her new book, “The Last Human Job,” the sociologist Allison Pugh shadowed an apprentice hospital chaplain as she went through her day. The chaplain ministered to a family that had lost a young woman to a Tylenol overdose. She went from room to room, praying, offering hugs, even singing with bereaved and anxious patients and family members. “There is nothing like being in the worst moment of your life and being met with comfort by someone you don’t even know,” she recounted a patient telling her.

The chaplain also had to track all of these profound connections in a janky online record that kept freezing, costing her precious minutes of the day that could have been spent in communion and support. She had to track her work in three separate systems overall.

Pugh interviewed not just chaplains. She spent five years following teachers, doctors, community organizers and hairdressers — more than 100 people in total who perform what she calls “connective labor,” which is work that requires an “emotional understanding” with another person.

Pugh explains that increasingly, people in these jobs have to use technology to obsessively monitor and standardize their work so that they might be more productive and theoretically have better (or at least more profitable) outcomes.

But a lot of care work cannot be tracked and cannot be standardized. Industrial logic, when applied to something like chaplaincy, borders on the absurd. How do you even measure success when it comes to providing spiritual comfort? Unlike with doctors, “the hospital did not bill anybody for her ‘units of service,’” Pugh writes about the chaplain, but she still had to figure out a way to chart her actions in multiple systems, which mostly didn’t capture what she was doing in the first place. This additional labor arguably made her a worse chaplain because it sapped her energy — dealing with the glitchy tech frustrated her — and wasted her time.

Pugh’s timely book reveals the hidden ways that technology is making many jobs miserable for both workers and consumers at a moment when artificial intelligence continues its unregulated incursion into our lives.

The pro-tech argument I often hear in my reporting on education and mental health therapy is that it’s better than nothing for people who would otherwise not have access to services. Which is to say: Emotional support through a chatbot is better than no support at all, and A.I. tutoring is better than no tutoring at all. Too many people accept these arguments as true without considering the social cost of cutting out everyday human interaction and the financial and environmental cost of the technology itself. A.I. chatbots don’t come free.

We’re increasingly becoming a society in which very wealthy people get obsequious, leisurely human care, like concierge medicine paid out of pocket, apothecaries with personal shoppers and private schools with tiny class sizes and dead-tree books. Everybody else might receive long waits for 15-minute appointments with harried doctors, a public school system with overworked teachers who are supplemented by unproven apps to “personalize” learning and a pharmacy with self-checkout.

Or, as Pugh puts it, “being able to have a human attend to your needs has become a luxury good.”

As I was reading her book, I had a minor revelation about the growing lack of trust in various American institutions. Overall trust in institutions is at historic lows, according to Gallup, and the picture is one of declining faith over the past 40 years. That’s roughly the same period in which technology has accelerated and replaced or bowdlerized a lot of low-stakes human interaction, otherwise known as weak ties, like the ones you have with a grocery store clerk you see regularly or even the primary care physician you see once a year.

I wondered if having to interact with an extremely stressed person who is being rated on how many customers she sees a day or, alternatively, talking to a malfunctioning robot that keeps asking us if we’re human is making many of us feel our institutions don’t care about us at all.

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