This book looks at automation in a number of industries (airline, automobile, health care, financial services, law, architecture etc.). Carr’s thesis, in a nutshell, suggests that automation poses a number of threats that have not been adequately examined in the rush to attain increased “efficiency.” He further argues that the issue of de-skilling has been almost completely overlooked. Indeed, he makes an interesting point when he asserts that de-skilling is built into many workplace practices.

One thing that all of his examples reveal is the tremendous hype that accompanies the introduction of any new technology in the field of automation. To take but one example: In the field of health care, the introduction of electronic medical records (EMR) was touted, by the RAND corporation, as having the potential of saving “more than $81 billion annually [my emphasis] and improve [ing] the quality of care” (92). This was in 2005. In 2013, a second RAND report acknowledged that “quality and efficiency of patient care are only marginally better” (94). Further, and arguably just as significant, are the unintended consequences. One striking example follows: “Before doctors had software to prompt them, they were less likely to add an extra charge for certain minor procedures. The procedures were subsumed into more general charges—for an office visit, say, or a yearly physical. With the prompts, the individual charges get added to the invoice automatically” (94).

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One excellent point that Carr makes, while obvious, is too little appreciated. quirky narrative about the history of automation and its impact on workers. Carr’s book lacks a similarly sharp focus on power imbalances that might have constructed a more sustained and coherent structure out of the building blocks of his various examples. Overall, though, his book is useful for showing the downside of automation in a number of fields and the similar challenges it poses to working people across many industries.

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