**////Title: Exploring the Dark, Dystopic Side of Digitalisation**

**////Standfirst:**

Over recent decades, the use of digital technologies has increased exponentially worldwide, bringing significant changes to daily life. Like most societal transformations, this process of ‘digitalisation’ has had both positive and negative aspects. Dr Jens Allwood,Professor Emeritus at the University of Gothenburg, has recently published a paper exploring some of the darker elements of digitalisation, particularly focusing on its tendency to dehumanise our daily activities.

**////Main text:**

Most radical changes in human society can have both positive and negative consequences. For instance, industrialisation, the historical period during which farming communities were transformed into industrial societies, had significant economic advantages. However, industrialisation is now also known to have fuelled the deterioration of Earth’s environment.

In recent years, digital technologies have become increasingly widespread, profoundly transforming how we work, communicate and conduct our daily activities. As a result, much information has been converted from a physical format into a digital one, so that it can be easily accessed, manipulated, and shared using digital technologies.

Corporations and governments often depict this process, known as digitalisation, in positive ways, highlighting its economic advantages. For instance, digitalisation is often praised for increasing efficiency and speed in numerous settings, while also reducing the costs of services and manufacturing processes.

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Despite its advantages, digitalisation also comes with its own shortcomings. Dr Jens Allwood in the Department of Applied IT at the University of Gothenburg has recently published a paper discussing some of the dystopian and dehumanising aspects of digitalisation.

In his paper, Dr Allwood suggests that digitalisation leads to the automation and dehumanisation of many practices that work perfectly well as they are, and even have many social and wellbeing-related advantages. These include face-to-face meetings and social events, in-store shopping, in-person medical care, and classroom-based education.

In many parts of the world, many of these face-to-face practices have already been substituted with digital processes to a large extent, particularly following the outbreak of COVID-19. Others activities, such as driving, elderly care and policing, are also becoming increasingly automated in some countries.

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In his paper, Dr Allwood outlines two different types of digitalisation processes and summarises their respective problems. The first of these types is the digitisation of information, which describes the conversion of paper documents, books, pictures and films into a digital format.

Of course, this digitisation process has notable advantages, as it can make information far more accessible, increasing the number of people who can benefit from it and reducing the need for physical archives. However, as digital technology and electronic devices are constantly evolving, past digitised material might also disappear.

Currently, the lifetime of digitally stored information remains unclear. In fact, storing information in digital format only, could make it far more prone to being lost over the years. Also, one might wonder what would happen to digitally stored information after a major electrical power cut or another event that affects the operation of computers and servers. In contrast, physical bookshelves and archives are likely to survive for hundreds of years.

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The second type of digitalisation discussed by Dr Allwood is aimed at improving the efficiency and speed of societal practices. This includes digital practices aimed at substituting procedures traditionally carried out by people, such as taxi service operators, shop assistants, customer service agents, psychotherapists, bank clerks and teachers.

In many cases, these forms of digitalisation might not be necessary or warranted, as our current practices already work very well. He also points out that some of these digitised processes, such as online banking, oblige customers to carry out procedures that were traditionally conducted by the service provider. In some cases, these digitised systems even oblige customers to pay for the opportunity to do this.

Dr Allwood also points out that businesses and governments rarely acknowledge the potential issues that people have to face when digital services malfunction.

In his paper, Dr Allwood also highlights how cyber-attacks can affect users’ privacy and security, while also causing disruptions to crucial services. To protect against such cyber-attacks, increasingly complex security measures often need to be introduced, which can be time-consuming and tedious for consumers to navigate, not to mention when malfunctions occur. The same measures can also intrude on privacy and increase control by governments and big business.

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As proposed by other researchers in the past, the digitalisation of social practices can also cause a rise in unemployment in specific sectors. This is so, since many of the digital processes that are now being introduced into society partly or fully substitute the work of human beings.

Dr Allwood explains that many of the people whose jobs disappear are part of the so-called middle class. Therefore, digitalisation could be reducing the numbers of middle-class jobs in numerous countries. Moreover, while many people might be losing their jobs due to digitalisation, it is still unclear whether new job opportunities or services will appear in the future to substitute their previous professions.

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According to Dr Allwood, digitalisation might actually be decreasing our wellbeing. Overall, he highlights that digitalisation could also go hand in hand with a ‘dehumanisation’ of everyday social practices, reducing people’s face-to-face interaction and social connection.

Despite increases in more superficial online contact, this reduction in our daily experiences of face-to-face contact could mean that there are fewer opportunities to form and maintain deeper relationships with other people, leading to a greater risk of loneliness.

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Dr Allwood’s paper emphasises that tech companies now have access to a far larger amount of user data. Furthermore, the ease of dissemination of information and the formation of interest groups on the internet often leads to fragmentation, misinformation, and confusion about important issues.

He also explains how digitalisation could be adversely impacting people’s creativity, as they can simply copy and paste information from the internet rather than coming up with their own ideas. Other cognitive abilities could also be negatively impacted, as our ease of access to search engines means that we no longer need to memorise certain types of information.

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In the future, Dr Allwood would like to see further analysis carried out, to determine who is profiting from the greater efficiency and speed associated with digitalisation. Specifically, he believes it is important to better understand the connection between digitalisation and increasing wealth inequality, as well as the rise of populist political ideologies.

Dr Allwood also believes that there should be far greater focus placed on how we can harness the benefits of digitalisation, while reducing its negative effects, allowing us to maintain face-to-face human practices that are essential to our quality of life.

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