

<http://somatosphere.net/2013/11/web-roundup-our-automated-lives-2.html>

## Web Roundup: Our automated lives

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By Lily Shapiro

As I'm studying in South India at the moment, it was impossible not to notice the hubbub around the Chess World Championship, which concluded last week in Chennai. I followed it closely, avidly reading the extensive coverage in the Indian press, and watching as many of the matches as I could live on YouTube. However, assuming very few of you are chess aficionados, the theme of this Web Roundup is not going to be "chess," but rather the familiar topic of advantages and perils of automation. To that end, we will start with one chess-related article. [Chess-Championship Results Show Powerful Role of Computers](#), published in the *Wall Street Journal*, explores the place of computers in the history of chess, and their contribution to substantial advances in human skill. Although Garry Kasparov famously lost against the computer Deep Blue in 1997, many people in the chess world seem to think that playing with and against computers has appreciably raised the skill level of today's best chess players.

The question raised by automation has fundamentally to do with what it means to be human in a world where, for instance, 3-D printers can print [prosthetic limbs](#) and [faces](#). As well as, for that matter, [food](#). Where the topics on Twitter are controlled by bots, rather than individual humans. Somewhere between 5-10% of Twitter accounts are fake, that is, run by programmed bots. Many bots can be owned by one person and, for a fee, made to follow stars, politicians, news stories, etc. And although that might not seem like a very high percentage, it's enough to influence trending topics. [Inside a Twitter Robot Factory](#).

In his article, [The Robots are Here](#), Tyler Cowen takes us through his predictions for an America whose economy is becoming ever more dependent on various forms of automation. I'm less convinced by his argument that this process will make us more politically conservative, but his statistics on labor and the replacement of workers by machines are interesting, if not particularly new. The obvious ethical dilemmas of replacing human work with machinery forms a sort of flip side to the growing field of robot ethics. The BBC, in an article about the research of Kate Darling at MIT, [Is it OK to torture or murder a robot?](#), raises the questions of cruelty to robots, robot unions and rights, and what such questions can tell us about our humanity, and the limits thereof. Put

differently, is the reason we find it creepy for someone to torture a robot because the robot itself has feelings and rights, or because torture itself is horrible, no matter its target?

Although [Data Shows Google's Robot Cars Are Smoother, Safer Drivers Than You or I](#), a forthcoming report by the Federal Aviation Administration finds that airplane pilots have become too dependent upon automation, to the extent that they sometimes make errors when forced not to fly in auto-pilot. Read about it in the Wall Street Journal [here](#). And of course its not only flying planes that we've forgotten how to do thanks to automation but, apparently, everything. [All Can Be Lost: The Risk of Putting Our Knowledge in the Hands of Machines](#).

As an antidote to all of this (perhaps slightly hyperbolic) gloom, the Atlantic also has a nice piece on the joys of memorizing poetry, [How Aimee Bender Feels After Memorizing a Poem: 'Caffeinated'](#), in which they site the study that came out this month in Science about [how reading literature changes your brain](#). We, of course, interact with a wide variety of technology every day, not all of it automated, and not all of it dehumanizing. [Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene](#) has less to do with how automation is changing us, and more to do with how humans are changing the planet. In the face of climate change, how can we contemplate, not only the possible, increasingly technical solutions, but also the fundamentally philosophical questions that confront us given an uncertain future?

Lastly, in my research for this post, I came across several other very interesting articles that do not necessarily fit into the above discussion, but which are quite worth taking a look at:

[Book of Lamentations](#) – From *The New Inquiry*. A review of the DSM-V as if it were a work of dystopian fiction.

[The Nazi Anatomists](#) – From *Slate*. A fascinating (though graphic) article; traces the history of Nazi anatomy and explores its legacy in contemporary anatomy classrooms and abortion debates.

[Should We Use Body Painting to Teach Anatomy?](#) – From *Smithsonian*.

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