Dr. Lulu Shi Lecture Abstract:

The Future(s) of Unpaid Work: How Susceptible Do Experts from Different Backgrounds Think the Domestic Sphere is to Automation?

The future of work has emerged as a prominent topic for research and policy debate. However, the debate has focused entirely on paid work, even though people in industrialized countries on average spend comparable amounts of time on unpaid work. The objectives of this study are therefore (1) to expand the future of work debate to unpaid domestic work and (2) to critique the main methodology used in previous studies. To these ends, we conducted a forecasting exercise in which 65 AI experts from the UK and Japan estimated how automatable are 17 housework and care work tasks. Unlike previous studies, we paid attention to how experts' diverse backgrounds may shape their estimates. On average our experts predicted that 39 percent of the time spent on a domestic task will be automatable within ten years. Japanese male experts were notably pessimistic about the potentials of domestic automation, a result we interpret through gender disparities in the Japanese household. Our contributions are to provide the first quantitative estimates concerning the future of unpaid work and to demonstrate how such predictions are socially contingent, with implications to forecasting methodology.

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Dr. Lulu Shi is a sociologist and her research spans technology, education, work and employment and organisations. She works on the project DomesticAI as a postdoctoral research fellow. In this project she focuses on the transformation of paid and unpaid work in the age of AI and robotics. With her team she designs a cross-national harmonised factorial survey experiment.

She also leads a project funded by the British Academy, which investigates how educational technology (EdTech) transforms education. Specifically, the project studies the role of EdTech firms—who can be seen as the architects behind the technology—in shaping education by considering the socio-political contexts they are embedded in.