AI and Business Models: The Good, The Bad and The Ugly

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Al and Business Models: The Good, The Bad and The Ugly

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Al and Business Models: The Good, The Bad and The Ugly

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ABSTRACT

Over the last five years, several scholars from a range of disciplines have started to analyse how Artificial Intelligence (AI) affects businesses outcomes. This research effort has produced many predictions on the expected impact of automation on labour demand and equilibrium employment. However, most of the expected results are dependent on how businesses change their behaviour due to adopting AI. We argue that, as AI diffuses across the economy, changing behaviour is a necessary outcome for incumbents: the argument is that the diffusion of AI across an industry generates the conditions for a process of value migration from incumbents to new entrants (Helper et al., 2018); in these cases, the only mechanism available to incumbents to offset the negative impact of the migration process is by changing the architecture of their business, i.e., the business model. However, companies can choose from several AI-driven business models; their preference for one model is driven by many industry-level factors such as technical standards, the structure of the technology industry and the presence of an ethical framework for the use of AI. This monologue summarises the existing literature on business model innovation and AI; it then analyses the industry-level factors that may shape the business-level preference for specific business models. Finally, the monologue offers some suggestions for future research in the area.

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1

Introduction

Interest in Artificial Intelligence (AI henceforth) has grown over the last five years. This interest has been spurred by many factors, including the availability of high volumes of data (both structured and unstructured), the dramatic fall of the costs of storing and processing large volumes of data, and cloud computing and platforms' availability. Unsurprisingly, several governments have started to invest substantial amounts of public funds into large AI research programmes.¹ What is AI exactly? In a nutshell, AI tries to simulate human intelligence through computer systems: more specifically, intelligent systems try to mimic the capability of humans to learn (or acquire new information), reason and self-correct (Calo, 2017). Importantly AI as a term covers a large variety of technologies ranging from machines that can recognise objects and make predictions to systems that have a sense of consciousness and can process their current state.

In economic terms, AI is modelled as a General Purpose Technology (GPT) that can improve productivity once deployed at scale (Brynjolfsson *et al.*, 2017). Most of our understanding of how AI can

¹For instance, the UK Industrial Strategy (2017) identifies AI as one of the grand challenges and the US American AI Initiative (2019).

affect economic outcomes is very much shaped by discussions on job losses and its impact on equilibrium employment (Acemoglu and Restrepo, 2019; Aghion et al., 2019). Recently, researchers from several disciplines have tried to broaden the discussion by focusing on the impact that AI may have on organisations by changing their internal processes, core capabilities and eventually their business models (Agrawal et al., 2017; van der Meulen, 2018). According to some authors, AI's impact on business outcomes may be rather sizable (see, for instance, Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014). In reality, given the emerging nature of the technology, it is not easy to quantify these impacts and the mechanisms through which AI will affect their performance (Brynjolfsson *et al.*, 2017). At the moment, the primary thinking is that AI may affect business performance by allowing businesses to use resources more efficiently over time. This outcome is mostly achieved by having AI systems to perform routine tasks which can be learned by software agents ("bots"), which can then prioritise tasks, manage routine interactions with other teams (or other bots), and plan schedules (Acemoglu and Restrepo, 2019; Aghion *et al.*, 2019). AI can also help businesses to streamline their activities and enrich their offerings with new and "smart" products² and lead to the adoption of new business models like Uber and Airbnb.³ Eventually, increases in efficiency and improved products may translate into increases in productivity and profits. There are already examples of organisations that use AI to either minimise costs or launch new products: for instance, Amazon already uses AI to plan the most efficient routes for delivery while legal firms tend to use AI to search through documents and legal records.⁴

Most of the benefits that AI can generate to businesses (and eventually translating into macroeconomic performance) are contingent on changes that businesses make to their business models. Unsurprisingly,

²This point has been made by Varian (2019) and Aghion *et al.* (2019).

³See also Boitnott (2019).

⁴Semmler and Rose (2017) discuss the case of three companies that use AI. The first company, ROSS Intelligence, uses natural language processing to perform legal research and memo drafting. The next company, LawGeex, uses machine learning for contract drafting. It compares the draft to a library of contracts and identifies uncommon or problematic clauses and missing clauses. Finally, Beagle uses AI to draft contracts, and it is targeted at non-lawyers.

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understanding how AI shapes new business models is key to understanding how it can influence future economic outcomes well beyond the existing narrative around job losses and technological unemployment (Acemoglu and Autor, 2011; Arntz et al., 2016; Bessen, 2018; OECD, 2015). For this, it is worth starting from a business model definition. Business models are usually defined as the "design or architecture of the value creation, delivery and capture mechanisms" of a business (Teece, 2010). A business model is about the benefits business creates, how it organises itself to do so, and how it will capture value. Business models per se are not immutable but tend to change as the business environment changes (Chesbrough, 2007, 2010, 2013; Lindgardt et al., 2012). In turn, this leads to the notion of business model innovation which is not about a new range of products or services offered by organisations, but it is a fundamental change of one of the elements of the current business model (Amit and Zott, 2015; Zott and Amit, 2010). This change can be in either the value proposition or the revenue model. In each case, the change has to provide the business with a new value source that can be used to sustain competitive advantage (Zott and Amit, 2010).

A typical driver of business model innovation is the emergence of a new technology that creates value migration conditions within industries (Foss and Saebi, 2017; Teece, 2010; Zott and Amit, 2010). In some cases, changing the architecture of their business (i.e., the business model) can be the only mechanism available to incumbents to offset the new technology's negative impact on their performance (Zott and Amit, 2010). A new business model can help incumbents cope with the changing technological landscape and ensure that the new technology's emergence does not compromise business outcomes. This fact applies to AI as well. In this case, businesses can choose from several new business models where AI is used to create and capture value, implying that AI's adoption does not necessarily translate into net job losses.

Despite the relevance of the topic, not much is known about the relationship between business model innovation and AI. There is a small literature on business model innovation and AI that struggles to disentangle the interdependencies between technology development and business model innovation (Antonescu, 2018; Tongur and Engwall, 2014). In other words, AI developments are assumed to "be" the business

model innovation even if in reality, the two concepts are separated. The underlying issue here is that while there is a good understanding of how AI (as new and emerging technology) powers new businesses, it is more difficult to understand how the choice of a new business model is intertwined with technology development and how industry-level factors can explain the choice of specific business models. As a result, there are essential questions in this field whose answers are unclear: how do businesses choose new business models? What are the factors shaping their choices? However, it will not be possible to answer these questions until we have a deeper understanding of how AI drives business model innovation.

Against this background, this monologue summarises the literature on AI and business model innovation by highlighting the mechanisms that link the two key variables. Our fundamental hypothesis is that the deployment of AI across an industry creates new mechanisms for value creation in the industry; this may result in new firms generating value in an industry as incumbent firms may no longer be competitive as in the past. This is the so-called "value migration" phenomenon, and in these cases, changes to the incumbents' business models are needed to generate value once more. We argue that incumbents have to change the business models once AI is adopted, but at the same time, the decision of what is changed (i.e., which component of the business model is changed) is up to the business. It is contingent on a mix of industry-level factors that can influence businesses' capability to identify successful new business models. In other words, adopting AI does not exclusively imply that businesses generate profits through cost reduction, as suggested by much of the economics literature.

Our analysis will start from the concept of value migration and how AI's deployment in an industry implies that the mechanism for value generation moves somewhere else in the industry; in this case, business model innovation is the only mechanism for businesses to try to generate value. We plan to discuss how AI systems are reshaping business models' mechanisms, approaches and founding elements (such as organisation, infrastructures, customers or value propositions). We will then move to map the business model innovations we can identify from the literature and produce a taxonomy of emerging AI-driven business models that

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will help understand how businesses decide to incorporate AI into their activities. Once we have laid out the different models that businesses can adopt when AI is deployed at scale in an industry, the analysis will focus on the industry-level factors that shape a specific business model's choice once an emerging technology is deployed. Our analysis will focus on many factors, including the role of technology standards, the technology industry's characteristics, and the ethical framework within which businesses operate. While the list is not exhaustive, we have chosen the list of important factors at this point given the nature of AI as an emerging technology.

The monologue wants to offer a summary of the existing literature in this area. It does not want to present new results but instead plans to highlight existing literature gaps, hoping these may spur new research in the topic. It is essential to highlight that lack of data on AI hampers empirical research in this area (Raj and Seamans, 2017); therefore, in our work, we will mostly refer to qualitative studies and grey literature that underpins most research in the field. In this respect, this work's vital purpose is to identify where formal research is needed to help us understand how business models change as AI diffusion across economies accelerates.

The structure of the monologue is as follows. Section 1 will provide a brief introduction to AI and its different varieties. Section 2 will then focus on value migration in industry and business models. Therefore, it will first define value migration and what it implies for existing business models. The discussion is conducted in the context of the AI and the implications of its diffusion for the whole industry. Section 3 provides a taxonomy of the new business models that have emerged due to AI and discusses these new business models' main features. Section 4 will then analyse the key factors that drive the emergence of new business models. Importantly, we will analyse a set of industry-level factors that may condition the new business model's choice. We will also discuss the role of an ethical framework on the emergence of the different business models. Finally, Section 5 offers some concluding remarks and some reflections on existing gaps in our knowledge of business models that can inform future research in the field.

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