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Disrupting Work; AI in Process Industry

Process Industry is said to benefit from AI technologies in terms of efficiency i.e. reducing energy consumption, reduction of environmental pollution, and eventually help realize a full circular economy. Such improvements are said to be made possible because AI technologies will improve decision making, make better use of existing data, replace repetitive transactional and judgment-related tasks, reduce human involvement in dangerous working environments and overall improve the operators' working conditions while at the same time transferring and formalizing operators' knowledge and best practices. However, the perceived threats and hurdles are being framed in terms of a limited willingness to adopt to new technologies, described in terms of (company) culture, hype, and the training of staff.

In this paper we present an ethnographic study of how the introduction of an AI technology in one factory plant was received by operators and managers. We observed how the social acceptance of this particular technology was discussed and negotiated, and how the future of work in the context of AI was imagined. The perceived work-related drivers and barriers are not only important to consider in the adoption of these emerging technologies. Building on Hannah Arendt's 'The Human Condition' we argue that AI disrupts our concept of work more general. Rather than human-centered AI we should talk about the future of work in order for AI to become instrumental to broad-based prosperity.