WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF AUTOMATION POST-COVID-19?

- based on Frank Pasquale's new book,
"New Laws of Robotics: Defending Human Expertise in an Age of AI."

The COVID epidemic has created pressures to reduce human interactions in service industries. Lockdowns of indefinite duration in some countries have made the case for robotics better than any business guru. When warehouse operators, meat packers, and farmworkers fear catching a deadly virus at work, robotization of their roles may appear outright humanitarian (if paired with some plausible promise of basic income provision and future jobs). The moral balance in many other sectors of service automation changes, as well. Being deemed an "essential worker" in the midst of a pandemic is a dubious honor. Even if a vaccine vanquishes the coronavirus strains that began ravaging the world in 2019, there is always a chance of another pandemic. This possibility, even if remote, adds force to the logic of workplace automation. A worse virus could decimate even essential services and supply chains, threatening social breakdown. The sudden materialization of the pandemic threat counsels in favor of accelerating robotics capable of assuring steady production and distribution of necessities.

But there will always be many social roles which demand a more human touch. We need to carefully draw a line between helpful, human-centered innovation, and mere exploitation of cost-pressures and crisis to promote premature automation. The story of robotics and AI is not simply one of inexorable technological advance. Wherever they are introduced, they will be greeted with both enthusiasm and trepidation, warmth and dismay. The job of policymakers is to decide how to reconcile these responses in a way that best combines respect for persons, recognition of resource constraints, and accountability. That will require ongoing investment in education and other human services.