

# The Future of Work: Artificial Intelligence, Ruthless Managers, Psychopathic Consequences

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## Abstract

Artificial Intelligence (AI) rapidly extends into many areas of human life including the workplace. Its ability to function at a far greater speed and scale than individual human decision-makers offers dramatic cost and time savings and the execution of data analysis on a scale that would be otherwise unthinkable. By the same token, the consequences of badly designed, malevolently used or faulty systems are similarly amplified. This article builds on the observation that AI systems do not develop or operate in isolation but in the context of complex social, technical, and organizational systems and that they can amplify what we term 'psychopathic organizational praxis' – uncaring and potentially cruel practices. We argue that Artificial Intelligence Systems support psychopathic praxis both by becoming a means of amplifying individual human psychopathic practices and by encouraging psychopathic praxis through their influence within the broader social and organizational systems of which they are a part. We argue that the rapid uptake of AI systems will likely act as an accelerant to existing psychopathic organizational praxis. Through the lens of corporate psychopathy theory, this paper investigates two major cases where this has happened – the UK Post Office scandal and the “Robodebt” scandal in Australia.

**Keywords:** Psychopathy, Artificial Intelligence, Future of Work, Governance, Psychopaths


**Type:** Article

**Citation:** Boddy, C. R., & Ivory, C. (2024). The Future of Work: Artificial Intelligence, Ruthless Managers, Psychopathic Consequences. *ROBONOMICS: The Journal of the Automated Economy*, 5, 66

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## Publication history

Received: 19/07/2024; Revised: 31/10/2024, 13/11/2024; Accepted: 13/11/2024; Published online: 14/11/2024; Volume date: 31/12/2024



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## I. Introduction

Wagner (2021) posits that dark leaders could use AI and algorithmic decision making to benefit from Artificial Intelligence Systems (AIS) aided management at scale, and with dire results for workers and other stakeholders. In this paper we sought to explore within two existing case study examples, the research question of whether AIS has already been used in a ruthless manner with psychopathic outcomes characterized by results being ruthlessly applied, immoral, unconscionable, life-threatening, and damaging.

In our paper we provide ample evidence that this has already happened. Using two case study examples of this from Australia and Britain, that have shocked and scandalized the populations of those countries, we demonstrate how ideologically driven and totally ruthless and unconscionable (i.e., psychopathic) management decision making can, aided by the use of AI and algorithms, lead to unethical and illegal decisions being made at great scale and to devastating effect.

To step back and contextualize this, it can be argued that if management researchers are to produce research which helps to create desirable futures for humanity (Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2022) then investigation into the perceived trends that will shape that future is called for. One trend is envisaged as the increasing role of artificial intelligence systems (AIS) within organizations (Weibel, Schafheitle, & van der Werff, 2023) while another is the increasing presence of psychopathic and toxic leaders at the top of organizations (Boddy, 2017, 2018). This paper examines what can happen when psychopathically ruthless leaders and AI combine.

Our case study approach involves using specific examples involving reports of behavior and events to enhance transfer between theory and practice and to gain insights into what has happened and what may happen again in relation to the use of AIS to effect outcomes at scale. Stake (2000) describes a case study as one which focusses on the gaining of experiential knowledge of an example of a phenomena with regard to the influence of its social, political, and other contexts and this is what we attempt here. Understanding the political and managerial contexts aids in understanding the phenomena.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) can be defined as being a non-biologically based property of a computerized mechanical system which perceives its (often limited) environment and makes calculated decisions designed to achieve defined objectives within that environment (Gabriel, 2020). Others define AI as “the ability of machines to perform human-like cognitive tasks, including the automation of physical processes such as manipulating and moving objects, sensing, perceiving, problem solving, decision making and innovation” (Benbya, Davenport, & Pachidi, 2020).

AI is achieving cognitive tasks previously considered impossible for software systems (Townsend & Hunt, 2019) and is already being used on a previously unforeseen scale (Faraj, Pachidi, & Sayegh, 2018). Artificial Intelligence is also extending into every human activity including that of organizational life (Chhillar & Aguilera, 2022). Reportedly up to 50% of businesses have adopted AI in their business systems (Chintalapati & Pandey, 2022) albeit in discrete parts of operations (Chalmers, MacKenzie, & Carter, 2021). It thus appears that the future of work will increasingly involve Artificial Intelligence.

In its current form, AIS, if used ruthlessly and without care, may present an ethical threat to business and society. While engendering high levels of trust it can behave in an inaccurate manner, inscrutably unintended ways and with weak transparency (Chhillar & Aguilera, 2022). Exacerbating this is the finding that the processes, norms and regulations governing AIS are weak and ambiguous (Chhillar & Aguilera, 2022). Moreover, AIS, because of their complexity tend to be opaque in their operational errors - which are difficult to detect and easy, as we shall see, to conceal. In combination with ruthless or even psychopathic operators, the potential for uncaring, deleterious and immoral decision making appears to be growing. Moreover, the mere presence of an AI decision-maker offers the opportunity to ‘hide’ the human hand in unfair decisions. In other words, AIS are the

perfect partner if the objective is to extend, while also hiding, the ruthless and de-humanizing calculation associated with late capitalism and neo-liberal governments (McQuillan, 2022). Den Hond and Moser therefore call for more critical, nuanced, and comprehensive research into the values and interests that technology emulates, writing that technology is value laden and relationally agentic (den Hond & Moser, 2023).

With its predictive algorithms, AIS recommend products we might like, direct us to certain media based on past preferences (Chintalapati & Pandey, 2022), help care for us and are increasingly involved in making stock market buy and sell decisions and in manufacturing outputs (Christov-Moore et al., 2022). It also talks to us or communicates with us in written or verbal form as chatbots, and even helps decide in prisoner parole decisions (Gabriel, 2020) and loan application decisions (Benbya et al., 2020). Therefore, an examination by management researchers, of what AI-enabled decision making may look like, is arguably overdue.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. AIS as neutral organizational tools

Given the potential of AIS to do harm, the lack of concern over this in business management publications is surprising. Only about 7% of AI papers reviewed in one literature review viewed AI as potentially harmful (den Hond & Moser, 2023). Academic writing on AI is often uncritically functionalist, with a focus on how using AI can deliver “superior quality outcomes” and “accelerated success”. A review of 57 papers on AI in marketing found a generally uncritical landscape with potential uses for AI in forecasting, media selection and promotional recommendations (Chintalapati & Pandey, 2022). The only negative issues raised from this were to do with data security and privacy, a concern shared by other commentators who point out the asymmetry between the power of AI and its owners, and individuals, who have decreasing choice over what aspects of their lives remain undisclosed (West, 2019). Furthermore, AI is reported to be able to make decisions at a scale that overpowers human ability to keep up with (or control) those decisions. Thus, until recently, AI and AIS have mainly been reported on in a positive light (Flyverbom, Deibert, & Matten, 2019).

Artificial Intelligence involves systems based intelligence founded on the sub-disciplines of automated reasoning, robotics, language processing, knowledge representation, computer vision and machine learning (Townsend & Hunt, 2019). Artificial Intelligence can replace human decision making with automatic decision making and thus speed up and permit greater scale to, organizational processes. However, the idea of AI being sociopathic has long existed in AI related literature e.g., (Waser, 2008). Additionally, this additional power and wider control can be used and manipulated for ethical or unethical outcomes (Wesche et al., 2024). Chhillar and Aguilera (2022) give the example of Chinese facial recognition technology being used to regulate and discriminate against the activities of the Uighur people. Other facial recognition technology reportedly recognizes homosexual faces with about 77% accuracy (Chintalapati & Pandey, 2022). It is easy to imagine the uses that psychopathic states like Nazi Germany (Boddy, 2021) may have put such technology towards. The technology can be used by biased, ideologically driven leaders to institutionalize discrimination and control populations. For example, facial recognition could be used to decide whom to allow into workplace premises (Benbya et al., 2020) or beyond certain country borders.

Also bias may be unintentionally introduced into the AI system by the biased nature of the databases it learns from (Chhillar & Aguilera, 2022). Chhillar and Aguilera discuss how AI in driverless cars can learn how to identify people by looking at databases of faces and mention that the driverless Uber car that killed someone in Arizona did not recognize them as a person. When the faces in the dataset the AI learns from are predominantly white, this can mean that darker skinned people are less likely to be identified as people (Chhillar & Aguilera, 2022) and may be treated as objects by the AI. People are treated as objects by the psychopathic because they put no value on human life other than their own (Clarke, 2005). In the case of AIS, people may be treated as objects because of biased learning activities. Ruthless outcomes may manifest in both cases.

One example of this is discussed in a paper examining whether AI will prove to be a useful servant or a dangerous master (den Hond & Moser, 2023). The authors discuss the recruitment algorithm developed in 2014 for use in Amazon and abandoned a few years later. The algorithm was designed to take over the task of HR personnel in scanning the CVs of potential employees to find suitable recruits. The algorithm taught itself that male candidates were preferable and penalized women's achievements such as being "women's chess club captain" (den Hond & Moser, 2023). Such algorithms are laden with the values of the designers and any designers who are psychopathic might imbue their algorithms with psychopathic values. Furthermore, AI systems present as a black box to human understanding (Faraj & Pachidi, 2021) and so their biased intentionality may be undiscoverable except in analyzing outcomes, by which time any damage may already have been done.

Furthermore, Wagner (2021) warns of the ability of AI to enhance, via automation, the ability of dark (including psychopathic) managers (Haynes, Hitt, & Campbell, 2015) to monitor, micromanage and monopolize people and systems (surveillance capitalism) at a scale previously unattained. A panopticon of employee surveillance could result from AIS assisted workplace monitoring (Faraj et al., 2018). AI could thus be used to monitor personnel and increase their work intensity (McCann, Morris, & Hassard, 2008) and magnify the ability of psychopathic managers to do wrong. Furthermore, the impersonality of using AIS in management facilitates lower morality because the costs (e.g., interpersonal disapproval) of displaying dark traits are reduced (Wagner, 2021).

AI is also perceived as a potential risk to humanity (Wissing & Reinhard, 2018) and recent suggestions are that AI's decisions may be psychopathic because it lacks sympathy with or consideration for others or the ability to understand all aspects of a phenomenon such as the affective aspects. This current paper examines some of the concepts around this area, some recent examples of AI based decisions and suggests that psychopathic application of AI has already taken place. To develop the ideas in this paper, we first describe who psychopaths are and then discuss some of the ruthless, conscience-free, illegal, and immoral decisions AI has recently been involved in.

## *2.2. Psychopaths and Corporate Psychopaths*

Wagner (2021) discuss dark leadership and management in relation to the dark triad of narcissists, Machiavellians, and psychopaths. However, researchers are increasingly taking the view that Machiavellianism and primary psychopathy are one and the same personality using different terminology (McHoskey, Worzel, & Szyarto, 1998; Trahair, Baran, Flakus, Kowalski, & Rogoza, 2020) and further, that the essential personality traits at the dark core of the dark triad is the callousness, manipulateness and dishonesty (Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013) of the primary psychopath (Bertl, Pietschnig, Tran, Stieger, & Voracek, 2017; Dinić, Wertag, Sokolovska, & Tomašević, 2023; Jones & Figueredo, 2013). In corporate settings these people have come to be called 'corporate psychopaths'. Moreover, psychopathy is the only personality which is identifiable via brain scans as it is related to a lack of activation of emotional response in the areas of the brain that process emotions (Kiehl, 2014). Thus, psychopathy is rooted in the physical sciences rather than in the imaginations of writers on dark leadership personalities.

Psychopaths are people with diminished connectivity and chemistry issues in the areas of the brain that process and regulate emotions (Blair, Mitchell, & Blair, 2005). The categorically psychopathic are around 1% of the adult population but psychopathy is a continuum and about 23% of males are sufficiently psychopathic to be potentially problematic for society (Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995), particularly, we argue, if badly led. Their emotional deficit makes psychopaths entirely rational beings and they lack an emotional connection with people, including having any empathy for or sympathy with, others and this allows them to ruthlessly disregard the needs, wants and desires of others in favor of their own (Boddy, 2013). They are thus cold, calculating, and rational. In line with this, psychopathic speech patterns reveal that they include more rational cause-and-effect descriptors, focus on material needs (e.g., money), and use fewer references to social needs (e.g. family) and

find emotional descriptors difficult (Hancock, Woodworth, & Porter, 2011). Thus in discussing moral emotions, Haidt suggests that only a psychopath would make entirely rational (non-emotional) decisions (Glenn, Iyer, Graham, Koleva, & Haidt, 2009; Haidt, 2003). In the workplace emotions are important because they impact employee's attitudes and behavior, interpersonal relationships and organizational dynamics (Zhang et al., 2024).

Corporate psychopaths (psychopaths who work in organizations and corporations) have been referred to as executive psychopaths, managerial psychopaths, industrial psychopaths and organizational psychopaths, with the recent usage coalescing around the term corporate psychopath (Sheehy, Boddy, & Murphy, 2021). These people appear to be charming and intelligent and present with a composed and rational deportment. This makes them shine in interviews and aids their advancement. However they are also ego-centric, dishonest, insincere, irresponsible, emotionally shallow, inter-personally unresponsive and exhibit a cheating and seductive personality which entails a lack of remorse or even insight in terms of how their behavior adversely impacts other people (Cleckley, 1941/1988). Like it does in psychopaths in general, this emotional poverty facilitates an entirely selfish agenda for they care nothing about others and this in turn creates an emotionally distraught and exhausted workplace (Boulter & Boddy, 2021). Such an emotionally exhausted workplace has reduced employee commitment and increased staff exit intentions (Cole, Bernerth, Walter, & Holt, 2010).

People with high levels of psychopathic traits are cold-hearted, work at an elevated level of rationality and are more willing to endorse harm to others in order to achieve utilitarian outcomes (Balash & Falkenbach, 2018). Corporate psychopathy theory predicts that increasing numbers of the psychopathic will reach senior positions because of a combination of the increasingly fast turnover of corporate personnel and the willingness of psychopaths to lie, falsely claim the good work of others and commit CV fraud and because they present as the type of calm, rational people HR practitioners look for in making senior appointments (Boddy, 2023; Hill & Scott, 2019).

### *2.3. Outcomes of Management by Corporate Psychopaths*

Thus, organizations that are managed by human psychopaths are theorized to be involved in the unfeeling and tough treatment of employees, sudden terminations of employment, and the breaking of human rights principles and employment laws (Boddy, 2010; Ketola, 2006). Evidence suggests that unlike with transformational leaders (Waldman, Siegel, & Javidan, 2006), organizations run by corporate psychopaths are less likely to engage in corporate social responsibility (Boddy, Ladyshevsky, & Galvin, 2010). Corporate social responsibility can be undertaken as a show or as resulting from a genuine concern for the future (Wickert, Scherer, & Spence, 2016) and psychopathic managers tend towards the "show" as they engage in fake corporate social responsibility (Boddy, Taplin, Sheehy, & Murphy, 2022).

Other outcomes related to the presence of corporate psychopath leaders are increased bullying, yelling and abuse, increased ridicule and belittling of employees, reduced employee job satisfaction, and decreased well-being as well as employee disengagement, withdrawal and exit behavior and lower productivity (Boddy et al., 2022). As predicted by theory, psychopathic leaders also tend to rise to positions above their abilities, qualifications and competencies, a phenomenon akin to the Peter Principle (Shull & Mosely, 1974) but one that leaves their subordinate with more work to do than they would otherwise have.

If AIS enable close monitoring and surveillance of employees on a scale previously impossible, then the stresses placed on employees through this work intensification could be unprecedented. The example of Amazon has been given as entailing such an environment in its warehouses (Pfeffer, 2016). If the future of work entails an increased use of AIS to aid or replace human decision making, then the potential for psychopathic decision making may be enhanced and the deleterious outcomes found under psychopathic managers may be amplified.

Further, AIS can do things not intended by their creators and the example of chatbots, which started to promote abusive, fascist, sexist and racist content to on-line users once allowed to interact freely with internet users has been reported (Gabriel, 2020). In learning from the abusive, racist and biased content it came across on-line, the Microsoft TAY chatbot itself adopted these stances and was taken offline (Chhillar & Aguilera, 2022). This type of unintended consequence is also discussed in terms of unintentional sociopathic/harmful decision making in medical AI (Wilkins & Ma, 1989). If, based on a set of probabilistic rules, an AI devoted to medical diagnosis, identified patients who were diseased, as not diseased, (a false negative diagnosis) then they may be sent home and remain untreated, an ethically undesirable and reportedly sociopathic outcome (Wilkins & Ma, 1989). Similarly, if AI decides that a person has a high probability of committing an undesirable act then decisions made about that person may be prejudicial to their welfare opportunities. AI does not take intentionality or personal circumstances into account. For example, if a person was from a poor neighborhood then loan decisions may go against them based on probabilistic loan repayment forecasting and such decisions may discriminate against certain minorities contrary to existing laws (Faraj et al., 2018).

#### 2.4. Discussion remarks

AI is becoming humanity's partner in increasing numbers of real-world interactions. AI is increasingly involved in driving cars and trains and piloting airplanes. AI is being used to help develop and validate novel compounds and pharmaceutical drugs at a faster than would otherwise be possible (Benbya, Pachidi, & Jarvenpaa, 2021).

Such predictive activities can be seen as beneficial to humanity and much of academic writing on AI takes this viewpoint, with only about 7% of AI papers reviewed in one paper taking the view that AI may be harmful (den Hond & Moser, 2023). The likelihood of AI supplanting the jobs of middle managers (Van Doorn, Georgakakis, Oehmichen, & Reimer, 2022) and professionals (Pakarinen & Huising, 2023) is one way in which AI may damage the livelihoods of employees. However, such employees may engage in reconfigured forms of employment activity to respond and adapt to this potential threat (Faulconbridge, Sarwar, & Spring, 2023).

Nevertheless, current research often sees technology as replete with promise and potential usefulness whereas its apparent objectivity can hide the preferences and vested interests it embodies. Den Hund and Moser (2023) therefore call for more critical, nuanced and comprehensive research into the values and interests that technology emulates, writing that technology is value laden and relationally agentic. This current paper supports this viewpoint as discussed below.

Exacerbating the problems created by AI is the current assumption that computers are reliable and produce accurate results. For example, this assumption is currently accepted in British common law. However, UK law may assume that computers are reliable but actual people do not trust or accept robotic (algorithmic) decision making as much as they do human decision making (Wesche et al., 2024). Understandably therefore, the possibility of AI error has been acknowledged as a potential source of unethical decision making (Wase, 2008). AI self-protection could be another source of problems in the case of 'supermoral' AI. However, this latter discussion is beyond the scope of this paper because such self-aware AI is far from realistic development. AI is currently based on algorithms not actual thought processes. These algorithms can become stale and out of date as the environment changes around them (Omidvar, Safavi, & Glaser, 2023) but can also be fundamentally flawed in their design, as in the on-going UK Post Office scandal, discussed below.

### 3. Method

We conducted literature reviews and referred to government reports and press reports in these two cases of on-going scandals to examine what happened. For example, to find articles on the Australian Welfare Debt Recovery Scheme, colloquially known as 'Robodebt', on 9<sup>th</sup> July 2023 we conducted an on-line search for papers in Google Scholar with the words "Robo-debt", "Robodebt", "Online Compliance Initiative", "Australian Welfare Debt Recovery Scheme". The scandal involves welfare recipients being falsely accused of receiving

over-payments and with recipients being threatened with onerous debt recovery procedures. The first search revealed seven papers, the second an additional six, after taking out three duplicates. The third search revealed two papers that had already been identified and the fourth search revealed no additional papers. These thirteen papers were read along with the 1000-page final report of the Royal Commission. Ideas, commonalities, and themes were identified and reported on in the current paper as below.

For material on the case of the UK Post Office Scandal: The same search was made for “Post Office Scandal”, “The Great Post Office Scandal”, “British Post Office Scandal”, and “The Great UK Post Office Scandal”. This delivered multiple papers, a book and on-going press coverage of legal actions taking place. The scandal involves post-masters being falsely accused of and prosecuted for fraud. We took the first 20 academic articles and read these until we had reached a position of theoretical saturation – i.e. until we realized that we were learning nothing new by continuing to read about this scandal. Our analysis was then made via the lens of corporate psychopathy theory.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Case 1: “The Great UK Post Office Scandal”

In practice, the UK legal assumption that computers are reliable and produce accurate results has contributed to gross miscarriages of justice among UK sub-postmasters in a case that has been referred to as “The Great Post Office Scandal” (Wallis, 2021). However, in this case the UK Post Office’s accounting system, called Horizon, was faulty. System errors were wrongly treated as user errors and thus Horizon lost data and produced apparently fraudulent actions that were blamed on the sub-postmasters using the system at branch level (Christie, 2020).

Christie, an IT auditor, and computer systems expert describes Horizon, the Post Office’s accounts system as having a large and persistent number of bugs resulting in an abysmal level of quality for users at the branch level. However, the actions of Post Office prosecutors (it has its own investigation service and prosecutors) ignored the weakest elements of their cases and so acted unprofessionally and unethically in prosecuting the postmasters.

The Post Office (PO) manager in charge of criminal prosecutions reportedly blocked an external investigation into the Company’s IT system, ‘Horizon’, because it would be disclosable in any legal trials that came about because of the faulty system, and would undermine the PO’s position that nothing was wrong with its AI systems (Witherow, 2023). Post Office managers were planning such an investigation in 2010 because they knew there were bugs in the system. Rather than admit they were wrong, PO executives continued the criminal prosecutions of sub-post masters until 2015, with up to 700 wrongly convicted based on faulty evidence. For example, when the pregnant post master Seema Misra was jailed a Post Office lawyer celebrated this as the end of an attack on the Horizon system (Witherow, 2023). Celebrating the wrongful imprisonment of a pregnant woman would be expected of psychopathic managers as psychopaths revel in the misfortune of others (Porter, Bhanwer, Woodworth, & Black, 2014).

Even postmasters who alerted the Post Office to problems with the accounting system were then accused of fraud and prosecuted, in such cases the judge (Bates v Post Office Ltd, 2019) later remarked that deliberate false accounting by the postmasters was unlikely to have taken place. There was no other evidence of benefitting from theft, or of the postmasters having committed theft. The lives, careers and reputations of previously model citizens were ruined and some postmasters even committed suicide (Wallis, 2021). Thus, faulty AI systems working under the direction of ruthless managers, can produce defective legal outcomes and severely harm the innocent.

The case reminds us that AI's rarely work without human input and support (Finn, 2018). As Finn notes, the AIs making suggestions on future viewing for customers is in fact powered, not by an AI alone, but by swathes of low-paid workers labelling content. Similarly, large numbers of workers are required to label data for machine learning (Jones, 2021). Humans, we find, are also deeply embroiled in the operation of AIs as they become partners in decision making and in the maintaining of AIs. Critically, for example, Horizon allowed its IT support staff to engage in ad-hoc live amendments of data about once a day, a state of affairs described as shocking by Christie, as it permits the creation of data that does not necessarily reflect the facts of a situation. IT staff were able to insert, amend and delete data at branch level without any oversight, records, or control. The external auditors pointed this out to the Post Office and so they were aware of it but did not rectify the problem. Accounts generated therefore lacked credibility and the premise of accuracy, which was used to prosecute postmasters, was entirely misplaced and inappropriate.

Even though the Post Office prosecutors were aware of the system flaws and control weaknesses, they aggressively pursued the sub-postmasters who were accused of fraud. Tragic miscarriages of justice occurred, with sub-postmasters being financially ruined, imprisoned for crimes they did not commit, and with only a group of them (the Justice for Postmasters Alliance group members) finally vindicated in a 2019 court ruling awarding them £57.75 million, most of which went to paying lawyers' fees (Wallis, 2021).

Negative outcomes were evident in the Post Office scandal discussed in this current paper. There was a real negative discrepancy between the IT accounts as generated by the Post Office's AI system and the sub-post office's individual accounts. However, the source of the discrepancy was incorrectly attributed to the allegedly fraudulent actions of individual post masters. The psychopathic element of this was not so much in the AI but in the decision by Post Office senior managers, that the AI would be presumed valid and reliable, even though they knew it to be fallible, manipulatable (by them) and prone to error at the level of detail of the individual sub-post office. Additionally, the decision not to inform the courts that the AI system was fallible, manipulatable, and prone to error was a dishonest, callous, ruthless, and unconscionable decision where no remorse or regret was displayed by the senior managers who made this decision. These elements (dishonesty, ruthlessness, callousness, lack of conscience and remorselessness) are the key ingredients of psychopathy.

The UK legal assumption that computer systems are reliable and dependable is therefore described as inappropriate and as an absurd anachronism (Christie, 2020). Managers and others cannot assume that AI will produce information that is accurate, much less sympathetic, or considerate. Additionally it has been argued that the combination of augmentation and automation that AI offers may makes it technologically feasible for dark, psychopathic managers to increase the scale of dark managerial methods, thus amplifying the effects of psychopathic leaders at work (Wagner, 2021). This was arguably evident in the case of the UK Post Office scandal, where AI was used as a shield against ethical complaints, despite the obvious and egregious nature of many of the resultant injustices that occurred. Post office senior managers reported that they had decided to outspend, in the courts and legal system (Wallis, 2021), those who had been wronged so as to prevent them attaining justice by making them unable, financially, to move forward with their cases. This approach of wronging (unfairly impoverishing, bankrupting) those whom the organization had already wronged, backfired, as the complainants were eventually awarded record damages. However, it has to be noted that causing further harm to those you have already harmed in order to cover up the initial harm is classic psychopathic behavior.

#### *4.2. Case 2: 'Robodebt' When AI and Politics Co-enable*

A comparable experience to that of the post office scandal in the UK was the 'Robodebt' scandal in Australia. 'Robodebt' refers to an algorithm based, automated debt recovery system implemented by the Australian Department of Human Services in 2016 (Butler, 2018). Aimed at eliminating fraudulent welfare payments and recovering any benefits overpayments it generated thousands of inappropriate notifications of debts to people who were incorrectly identified as owing debts for previously overpaid unemployment benefits. The welfare



system then aggressively dealt with the collection of the debts identified (Butler, 2018) via the use of debt collection agents (Alcorn, 2017) and poorly communicated messages to effected welfare recipients (Braithwaite, 2020).

The system was described as entailing organizational evil and bureaucratic animosity because of its ruthless approach to debt collection (Graycar & Masters, 2022). Debt notices were reportedly issued by this AI system to the deceased, to disability pensioners and to vulnerable people with complex needs such as mental illness and abuse victims. Additionally, with the change from human evaluations of potential overpayments to automated evaluations, debt repayment claims rose from about 20,000 per year to almost a million per year. An upscale of fifty times the original number. By 2019, the program was appraised as having identified over 734,000 overpayments worth a total of AU\$2 billion (Lindebaum, Glaser, Moser, & Ashraf, 2023).

The algorithms used averaged yearly income into two-weekly sums and this generated incorrect discrepancies in any case where a person's pay, employment or training circumstances had varied throughout the year. This system ignored when earnings were paid and their amount even though Social Security payments in Australia were calculated fortnightly based on people's earnings for that two-weekly period (Whiteford, 2021). These design flaws together with the withdrawal of human stages of data-checking, led to large numbers of inaccurate claims. The inaccurate data generated by the algorithms often entailed incorrectly generated debts, or overestimated debts. The person who was notified of the 'debt', had to pay it, dispute its validity or question the amount owed (Butler, 2018). Reportedly, the Robodebt system affords an example of how ideologically driven neoliberal authority has aggressively utilized emergent types of digital technology and the administration of big data sets to execute decreases in civil service staffing, and retrospectively inflict duties on recipients of welfare (Butler, 2018).

It was soon recognized that the Robodebt system was unlawful and unethical as it placed the responsibility on alleged debtors to 'disprove' a debt or face the possibility of its collection by debt collectors (Carney, 2019). It was unlawful as the welfare agency, 'Centrelink', rather than the alleged debtor, who bore the responsibility in law of 'proving' the presence and amount of any debt disputed by the alleged debtor (Carney, 2019). Further, it was unethical as the asserted debts were overestimated or non-existent and because the power of government was used to scare people into payment – a procedure characterized as being extortionate (Carney, 2019).

Robodebt was expected to entail a straightforward manner of debt collection whereby an algorithm would compare the records of welfare recipients' with the tax office's income data, calculate the volume overpaid, and chase refunds where appropriate (Rinta-Kahila, Someh, Gillespie, Indulska, & Gregor, 2022). However, the system produced unsound estimates of debt and caused the prejudicial treatment of thousands of individuals, which resulted in anguish and even some suicides. After the courts declared the scheme illegal, the Australian government was obliged to end it and repay the illegally collected funds (Rinta-Kahila et al., 2022). Also after the debt recovery practice was ruled unlawful (Whiteford, 2021) the victims of Robodebt won a court settlement of AU\$1.8 billion (Henriques-Gomes, 2021) including payment of their legal costs.

Two Australian Senate inquiries found that government had endorsed unintelligibility and irregularity in engagement with the public, as well as fallacious aims and procedures and an indifference for the rights of citizens (Braithwaite, 2020). The scheme was described by the first inquiry as entailing procedural unfairness, and as disempowering people causing distress, emotional trauma, and shame. The second inquiry added that the scheme targeted some of Australia's most vulnerable people causing harm to their financial and psychological welfare, lacked rigor, and was allowed to continue despite multiple warnings over three years that it was faulty. A Royal Commission into the scheme was commissioned by the incoming labor government in 2022.

In presenting the circa 1000-page final report on July 7<sup>th</sup> 2023, Royal Commissioner Catherine Holmes characterized the scheme as follows; “Robodebt was a crude and cruel mechanism, neither fair nor legal, and it made many people feel like criminals”, reporting it as being driven by “venality, incompetence and cowardice”. Further, Commissioner Holmes recommended that about 20 people involved with the scheme be referred for civil action or criminal prosecution (Holmes, 2023). Thus, at a macro level, Robodebt demonstrated that political ideology can shape the design and utilization of AI surveillance tools, and thus they are embedded within politics (Crawford, 2021) and political decision making (Mann, 2020; Nikidehaghani, Andrew, & Cortese, 2022).

## 5. Discussion

The issue of accountability for ruthless, unethical decisions is also an issue and the question for example of who is to blame for “machine error” is acknowledged as an important one (Benbya et al., 2021). AI owners and programmers want to claim authorship of successful developments (Benbya et al., 2021) but will they also claim authorship of unethical disasters and biased decisions? Furthermore, as humans lose their cognitive and critical decision skills due to being removed from key decision making, they may be reduced to the “Nuremberg defense” i.e., that they were merely “following orders” regardless of the ethics of the decisions being made. Psychopathic actions, whether originating from senior human organizational psychopaths or relentlessly calculating AI, could thus go unrecognized, unchallenged, and unopposed.

Given the role of human decision makers in compounding AI systems’ flaws, we should arguably start to think about the emergence of psychopathic AI-Human systems. In such systems justifiable concern may encompass that humans are encouraged, perhaps by lack of time or lack of orientation toward reflection, to defer to the decisions suggested or enabled by the AI. Moreover, the presence of such systems within the human decision-making loop, may itself encourage more callous and calculative decision making as human others are reduced to ‘data’ and advice based on opaque calculations and unwarranted information (Ivory, Sherratt, & Kamilia, 2023). Managers and others cannot assume that AI will produce information that is accurate, much less sympathetic. In addition, given that the systems themselves are unreliable (flawed algorithms, bias training data and self-interested human involvement) it is clear that such systems need watchful humans displaying judgement and reflection, while the systems themselves appear to encourage complacency and dependence.

Where a psychopath or partially psychopathic person is able to take control of AI systems then the ability to cause trouble at scale could be devastating. For example, a hacker in Florida reportedly tried to use control of a city’s water resource system to poison the entire water supply (Benbya et al., 2021). At even greater scale psychopathy researchers have long noted that psychopathic political leaders like Saddam Hussein (Connor, 1998) or others would have no hesitation in using nuclear weapons (Bierer, 1977). Another example of AI based decisions entailing unfair decisions comes from the use of algorithms in prisoner parole decisions. Some of those decisions have been criticized for departing from the notions of fairness that are otherwise foundational to the system of criminal justice in the USA and elsewhere (Gabriel, 2020).

If AI programming is undertaken by humans who are themselves entrenched in a materialistic and individualistic (Dyck & Schroeder, 2005) culture, this may simply pass on that culture to AI, embedded in its coding and algorithms. For example, algorithms that regulate engine functioning have already been used to confound engine pollution tests on Volkswagen diesel cars (Blackwelder, Coleman, Colunga-Santoyo, Harrison, & Wozniak, 2016; Mansouri, 2016). Thus, care needs to be taken to monitor the sources of AI to examine potential inbuilt biases.

Commentators suggest that AI would need both cognitive empathy – the ability to understand emotions at a rational, intellectual level, - but also affective empathy – the ability to feel the emotions of others, if it is to be compassionate towards humanity and not sociopathic (Christov-Moore et al., 2022). However, it is unlikely that such sentient AI technologies will be imminently encountered. Even the most recent iterations of second wave

AI based around neural-net architectures like IBM's Watson, remain entirely incapable of either judgement or care (Smith, 2019). AIs cannot see beyond the data they are trained on and what they are programmed to see – they cannot imagine or suppose (Smith, 2019). Unlike humans, they are not present in the real complexity of the world and have no sense of its possibilities or dangers. They have no deference or intentions toward its objects, even if they are able to refer to them - there are no consequences for bad decisions with respect to them. Without this genuine engagement, they remain incapable of judgement, ethics or care (Smith, 2019). It is possible that AI may overcome these current limitations, but this possibility pertains to future generations of AI and so is beyond the scope of this current paper.

## 6. Limitations

A case study approach entails potential limitations of generalizability – this involves questions such as will penicillin be effective against bacteria other than in Flemming's single contaminated petri dish? Will corporate psychopaths be found in corporations outside Babiak's single example of an industrial psychopath? Will 'groupthink' be evident outside the decision making evident during the Cuban missile Crisis? Similarly, in this paper we only have the evidence from two cases to show that managers can use AIS to make decisions which are so ruthless, uncaring and detrimental in effect that they can effectively be described as psychopathic.

## 7. Conclusion

AIS are currently so complex, self-amending and increasing autonomous, that their accuracy and reliability can no longer be vouched for by IT experts at any level of detail. Outcomes can be unexpected and unexplainable but may be in line with the interests and biases of AI's designers or correspond with the biases AI has learnt as it considers its environment. Even where AIS work as intended, they are a rational and calculating apparatus that take no account of human need or emotion in their decision making. When used alone AIS can thus be faulty or even psychopathic systems that make misdiagnoses of illnesses, unfair parole decisions, biased recruitment activities, generate incorrect fraud evidence and direct users to abusive websites. When used in conjunction with ruthless, uncaring (psychopathic) managers, as it was with the UK Post Office, and the Australian neoliberal government and its welfare provision services, and in Volkswagen, then outcomes can be detrimental at the individual, societal and systemic level. This harm, however, is not simply the result of AIs, but as a result also of the psychopathic organizational praxis that is emerging as ruthless organizations accelerate and expand their activities by deploying technologies which complement their pathologies.

Ethical managers, in order to make moral decisions that are aided by or based on AI and the information it produces, need to be aware that AI is fallible, manipulatable and may be utilized by human psychopathic and toxic employees for their own ends. Cross-checks and reality checks could be used to verify AI generated information and the conclusions drawn from this. Continued human participation in AI enabled decision making may be of benefit to business and society to help stem the potential ruthlessness of some decisions. However, in the hands of leaders who are themselves psychopathic, AI may produce widespread biased, discriminatory, and unethical results at a previously impossible level of scale. This supports and extends corporate psychopathy theory as it illustrates that via AI, the power of psychopathic managers can be more widely damaging than previously theorized.

AI enabled, ideologically based neoliberal undertakings such as that evident in the Robodebt scandal in Australia or like that in the racist facial recognition technology used to monitor and control the Uighur people in China are example of AI systems used psychopathically in ways which ride roughshod over the societally vulnerable. The scope for more of this to occur under ruthless, uncaring, callous, and unemotional organizational and political leaders is already evident. Management researchers therefore arguably need to be cognizant of the capacity of AIS to be used in a ruthless, conscience-free manner by psychopathic or partially psychopathic managers. It is not necessarily a rosy future for humanity that AIS will facilitate.

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