THE SHIFT

His 2020 Campaign Message: The Robots Are Coming

By Kevin Roose

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Among the many, many Democrats who will seek the party’s presidential nomination in 2020, most probably agree on a handful of core issues: protecting DACA, rejoining the Paris climate agreement, unraveling President Trump’s tax breaks for the wealthy.

Only one of them will be focused on the robot apocalypse.

That candidate is Andrew Yang, a well-connected New York businessman who is mounting a longer-than-long-shot bid for the White House. Mr. Yang, a former tech executive who started the nonprofit organization Venture for America, believes that automation and advanced artificial intelligence will soon make millions of jobs obsolete — yours, mine, those of our accountants and radiologists and grocery store cashiers. He says America needs to take radical steps to prevent Great Depression-level unemployment and a total societal meltdown, including handing out trillions of dollars in cash.

“All you need is self-driving cars to destabilize society,” Mr. Yang, 43, said over lunch at a Thai restaurant in Manhattan last month, in his first interview about his campaign. In just a few years, he said, “we’re going to have a million truck drivers out of work who are 94 percent male, with an average level of education of high school or one year of college.”

“That one innovation,” he continued, “will be enough to create riots in the street. And we’re about to do the same thing to retail workers, call center workers, fast-food workers, insurance companies, accounting firms.”

Alarmist? Sure. But Mr. Yang’s doomsday prophecy echoes the concerns of a growing number of labor economists and tech experts who are worried about the coming economic consequences of automation. A 2017 report by McKinsey & Company, the consulting firm, concluded that by 2030 — three presidential terms from now — as many as one-third of American jobs may disappear because of automation. (Other studies have given cheerier forecasts, predicting that new jobs will replace most of the lost ones.)

Perhaps it was inevitable that a tech-skeptic candidate would try to seize the moment. Scrutiny of tech companies like Facebook and Google has increased in recent years, and worries about monopolistic behavior, malicious exploitation of social media and the addictive effects of
smartphones have made a once-bulletproof industry politically vulnerable. Even industry insiders have begun to join the backlash.

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To fend off the coming robots, Mr. Yang is pushing what he calls a “Freedom Dividend,” a monthly check for $1,000 that would be sent to every American from age 18 to 64, regardless of income or employment status. These payments, he says, would bring everyone in America up to approximately the poverty line, even if they were directly hit by automation. Medicare and Medicaid would be unaffected under Mr. Yang’s plan, but people receiving government benefits such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program could choose to continue receiving those benefits, or take the $1,000 monthly payments instead.

The Freedom Dividend isn’t a new idea. It’s a rebranding of universal basic income, a policy that has been popular in academic and think-tank circles for decades, was favored by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the economist Milton Friedman, and has more recently caught the eye of Silicon Valley technologists. Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg and the venture capitalist Marc Andreessen have all expressed support for the idea of a universal basic income. Y Combinator, the influential start-up incubator, is running a basic income experiment with 3,000 participants in two states.

Despite its popularity among left-leaning academics and executives, universal basic income is still a leaderless movement that has yet to break into mainstream politics. Mr. Yang thinks he can sell the idea in Washington by framing it as a pro-business policy.

“I’m a capitalist,” he said, “and I believe that universal basic income is necessary for capitalism to continue.”

Mr. Yang, a married father of two boys, is a fast-talking extrovert who wears the nu-executive uniform of a blazer and jeans without a tie. He keeps a daily journal of things he's grateful for, and peppers conversations with business-world catchphrases like “core competency.” After graduating from Brown University and Columbia Law School, he quit his job at a big law firm and began working in tech. He ran an internet start-up that failed during the first dot-com bust, worked as an executive at a health care start-up and helped build a test-prep business that was acquired by Kaplan in 2009, netting him a modest fortune.

He caught the political bug after starting Venture for America, an organization modeled after Teach for America that connects recent college graduates with start-up businesses. During his travels to Midwestern cities, he began to connect the growth of anti-establishment populism with the rise of workplace automation.
“The reason Donald Trump was elected was that we automated away four million manufacturing jobs in Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin,” he said. “If you look at the voter data, it shows that the higher the level of concentration of manufacturing robots in a district, the more that district voted for Trump.”
Mr. Yang has proposed monthly payments of $1,000 for every American from age 18 to 64. “I'm a capitalist,” he said, “and I believe that universal basic income is necessary for capitalism to continue.” Guerin Blask for The New York Times
Mr. Yang’s skepticism of technology extends beyond factory robots. In his campaign book, “The War on Normal People,” he writes that he wants to establish a Department of the Attention Economy in order to regulate social media companies like Facebook and Twitter. He also proposes appointing a cabinet-level secretary of technology, based in Silicon Valley, to study the effects of emerging technologies.

Critics may dismiss Mr. Yang’s campaign (slogan: “Humanity First”) as a futurist vanity stunt. The Democratic pipeline is already stuffed with would-be 2020 contenders, most of whom already have the public profile and political experience that Mr. Yang lacks — and at least one of whom, Senator Bernie Sanders, has already hinted at support for a universal basic income.

Opponents of universal basic income have also pointed to its steep price tag — an annual outlay of $12,000 per American adult would cost approximately $2 trillion, equivalent to roughly half of the current federal budget — and the possibility that giving out free money could encourage people not to work. These reasons, among others, are why Hillary Clinton, who considered adding universal basic income to her 2016 platform, concluded it was “exciting but not realistic.”

“In our political culture, there are formidable political obstacles to providing cash to working-age people who aren’t employed, and it’s unlikely that U.B.I. could surmount them,” Robert Greenstein, the president of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a Washington research group, wrote last year.

But Mr. Yang thinks he can make the case. He has proposed paying for a basic income with a value-added tax, a consumption-based levy that he says would raise money from companies that profit from automation. A recent study by the Roosevelt Institute, a left-leaning policy think-tank, suggested that such a plan, paid for by a progressive tax plan, could grow the economy by more than 2 percent and provide jobs for 1.1 million more people.

“Universal basic income is an old idea,” Mr. Yang said, “but it’s an old idea that right now is uniquely relevant because of what we’re experiencing in society.”

Mr. Yang’s prominent supporters include Andy Stern, a former leader of Service Employees International Union, who credited him with “opening up a discussion that the country’s afraid to have.” His campaign has also attracted some of Silicon Valley’s elites. Tony Hsieh, the chief executive of Zappos, is an early donor to Mr. Yang’s campaign, as are several venture capitalists and high-ranking alumni of Facebook and Google.

Mr. Yang, who has raised roughly $130,000 since filing his official paperwork with the Federal Election Commission in November, says he will ultimately raise millions from supporters in the tech industry and elsewhere to supplement his own money.

Mr. Yang has other radical ideas, too. He wants to appoint a White House psychologist, “make taxes fun” by turning April 15 into a national holiday and put into effect “digital social credits,” a kind of gamified reward system to encourage socially productive behavior. To stem corruption, he
suggests increasing the president’s salary to $4 million from its current $400,000, and sharply raising the pay of other federal regulators, while barring them from accepting paid speaking gigs or lucrative private-sector jobs after leaving office.

And although he said he was socially liberal, he admitted that he hadn’t fully developed all his positions. (On most social issues, Mr. Yang said, “I believe what you probably think I believe.”)

The likelihood, of course, is that Mr. Yang’s candidacy won’t end with a parade down Pennsylvania Avenue. Still, experts I spoke with were glad to have him talking about the long-term risks of automation, at a time when much of Washington is consumed with the immediate and visible.

Erik Brynjolfsson, the director of M.I.T.'s Initiative on the Digital Economy and a co-author of “The Second Machine Age,” praised Mr. Yang for bringing automation’s economic effects into the conversation.

“This is a serious problem, and it’s going to get a lot worse,” Mr. Brynjolfsson said. “In every election for the next 10 or 20 years, this will become a more salient issue, and the candidates who can speak to it effectively will do well.”

Mr. Yang knows he could sound the automation alarm without running for president. But he feels a sense of urgency. In his view, there’s no time to mess around with think-tank papers and “super PACs,” because the clock is ticking.

“We have five to 10 years before truckers lose their jobs,” he said, “and all hell breaks loose.”

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