

Big Brother: A critique of the 4th Industrial Revolution | Berkman Klein Center Collection

By Tunde Okunoye

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While artificial intelligence (AI), a signature technology of the 4th Industrial revolution (4IR), has been projected to transform the socioeconomic landscape of Africa by creating new efficiencies in the public and private sectors, it has some way to go to live up to this hope. Instead of exciting public-led applications such as the use of AI by the National Health Service (NHS) in the United Kingdom to fight diseases, the most promising applications of AI in Africa are, not surprisingly, private sector-dominated. From behemoths like Google and Facebook to smaller startups, private firms are attempting to create impact at scale in Africa through applications such as chatbots in healthcare and the financial industry and AI drone-empowered disease surveillance in agriculture. As I've explained elsewhere, African countries will falter in their quest for an AI-led 4IR economic boost if they neglect investments in foundational 2nd and 3rd IR technologies such as efficient transport systems, power grids, and reliable broadband connections for a critical mass of the population. The 4IR does not happen in a bubble; it feeds upon successful integration with 2nd and 3rd IR technologies. Little wonder, then, that the most visible public-private partnership in AI deployment for societal good during the Covid-19 pandemic was its use for disease surveillance in Johannesburg — within Africa's most advanced economy where 2nd and 3rd IR technologies are better developed than in most of Africa.

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