Like universities all over the world, South African universities are grappling with the implications of living in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), where there is a blurring of boundaries between the physical, digital, and biological domains. They are asking themselves what the accelerating combination of machine automation, the changing nature of work, and the ubiquitous digital mediation of daily life, means for the core function of a university i.e. that of knowledge production and dissemination. At the same time, South African universities are also asking what these profound social and technological changes mean for their role in a deeply unequal society and whether they will hinder or enhance the democratisation of knowledge creation and access.

The challenges posed by the 4IR are closely linked to other challenges facing the universities in general, especially the persistent state of underfunding public universities and the rapid marketisation of the sector in most places in the world. It has been convincingly argued during this era that capitalism itself has been restructured into a new form, platform capitalism, whereby the big digital platforms (Google, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, Facebook) are reshaping the nature of the economy. Higher education scholars are warning that this in turn is leading to the emergence of the “platform university” underpinned by a data-driven business model designed to extract profits from higher education and its market opportunities.

It is in this situation, that public universities everywhere must ask themselves how they can continue to fulfill their missions of civic responsibility and inclusivity for democratic ends. In the light of its history, South African universities also ask how they can contribute to redressing the wrongs of the past to address the stark social and economic divisions resulting from hard to shift structural inequalities in the country. Unlike many other public universities elsewhere in the world, South African universities are especially cognate of this imperative and express an overt commitment to a social justice agenda. They are less entangled in marketised discourses than higher education sectors elsewhere (like England and the United States of America) and are
in a stronger position to confront the new digital era with the will to leverage the emerging models and digital affordances for the public good.

This requires a concentrated focus of building on their core strengths including research, policy engagement, innovation, curriculum review, professional development and enabling students with appropriate graduate attributes. Encouragingly, there is already evidence of original initiatives which are framing and exploring elements of the 4IR with a public good agenda.

The full article is available on the following link:

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