RoboTruckers: The Double Threat of AI for Low-Wage Work
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Of late, much attention has been paid to the risk artificial intelligence poses to employment, particularly in low-wage industries. The question has invited well-placed concern from policymakers, as the prospect of millions of low-skilled workers finding themselves rather suddenly without employment brings with it the potential for tremendous social and economic disruption. Long-haul truck driving is perceived as a prime target for such displacement, due to the fast-developing technical capabilities of autonomous vehicles (many of which lend themselves in particular to the specific needs of truck driving), characteristics of the nature of trucking labor, and the political economy of the industry. In most of the public rhetoric about the threat of the self-driving truck, the trucker is contemplated as a *displaced* party. He is displaced both physically and economically: removed from the cab of the truck, and from his means of economic provision. The robot has replaced his imperfect, disobedient, tired, inefficient body, rendering him redundant, irrelevant, and jobless. But the reality is more complicated. The intrusion of automation into the truck cab indeed presents a threat to the trucker—but the threat is not solely or even primarily being experienced, as it is so often described, as a displacement. The trucker is still in the cab, doing the work of truck driving—but he is increasingly *joined there* by intelligent systems that monitor his body directly. Hats that monitor his brain waves and head position, vests that track his heart rate, cameras trained on his eyelids for signs of fatigue or inattention: these systems flash lights in his face, jolt his seat, and send reports to his dispatcher or even his family members should the trucker's focus waver. As more trucking firms integrate such technologies into their safety programs, truckers are not currently being displaced by intelligent systems. Rather, they are experiencing the emergence of intelligent systems as a *compelled hybridization*, a very intimate incursion into their privacy. This paper considers the dual, conflicting narratives of job replacement *by* robots and of bodily integration *with* robots, in order to assess the true range of potential effects of AI on low-wage work.

[This paper is a chapter from my book-in-progress, *Data Driven: Truckers and the New Workplace Surveillance*.]