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Amid big AI push, human capability and intelligence must still be relevant

How Singapore uses AI will define whether technology ends up enabling or disabling society. **BY EUGENE K B TAN**

THAT artificial intelligence (AI) will form the bedrock of Singapore's economy was abundantly clear from Prime Minister Lawrence Wong's National Day Rally speech on Sunday (Aug 17).

AI featured prominently in his discussion of the economy and its challenges as well as how Singapore and Singaporeans can thrive in this new environment.

At the Global-City Singapore: SG60 and Beyond conference last month, PM Wong said that Singapore could harness new technology to create new jobs.

The city-state's small size and the strong tripartite relationship between the government, employers and unions meant that it could discuss redesigning jobs and retraining workers, even before new technology is rolled out. He also said that given the broad-based adoption of AI "we have no choice" but to follow suit.

AI to be pervasive

On Sunday, PM Wong hinted that the Singapore Economic Resilience Taskforce – chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Gan Kim Yong and tasked with reviewing and rejuvenating the country's economic strategies – would recommend that innovation and technology be made more pervasive in the economy.

PM Wong emphasised that while investing in and developing cutting edge technology were necessary, equally important was how quickly new technologies were "to raise productivity and create new value through every part of the economy".

He was confident that AI could be rolled out in the same way as the nationwide computerisation drive in the 1980s, resulting in a win-win outcome for the economy and workers alike.

He acknowledged the concerns that AI would replace entire jobs. He assured Singaporeans that they would "always be at the centre of everything we do" in this push to embrace emergent technologies, and that there will not be a headlong rush to adopt new technology.

It is an understatement that Singapore's leaders consider AI and other emergent technologies as having the wherewithal to be the next engine of growth.

This was clear from the "National AI Strategy 2.0: AI for the public good for Singapore and the world" launched in 2023. This drive sought to have Singapore at the forefront driving global innovation in technology.

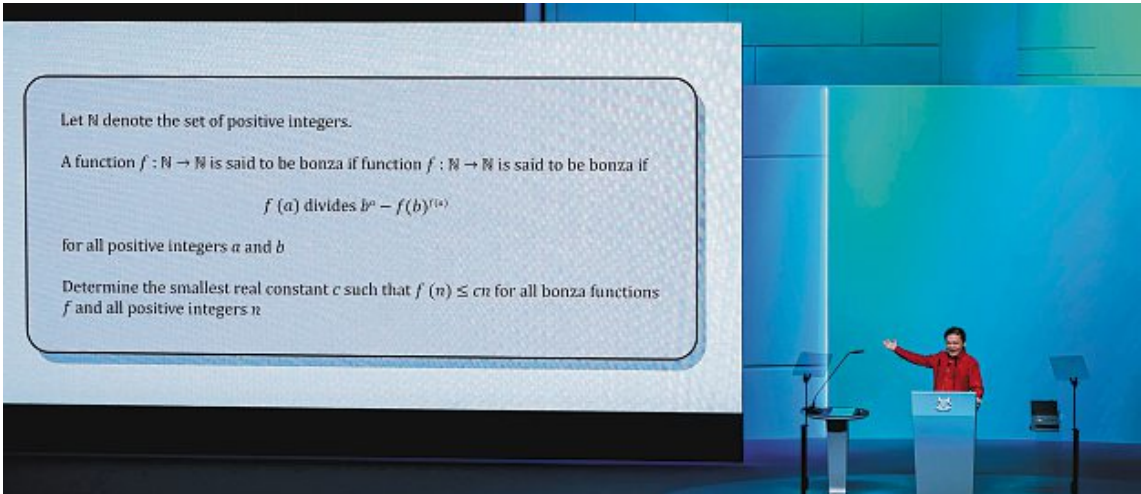
PM Wong described AI as "a defining technology of our time (that) will fundamentally change the way we live, work and interact with one another".

Timely to consider AI's impact on society

Considering how AI will feature in every facet of life, it was somewhat of a missed opportunity for PM Wong – he could have outlined how the game-changing technologies will not undermine Singapore's social compact and the societal ethos.

Perhaps, this could be fleshed out in the President's Address, its addendum and the subsequent debate when the 15th Parliament opens in September.

Although there is no one inevitable path in the development of new technology, new



At the National Day Rally, PM Wong showed a complex maths question from the International Math Olympiad that was correctly solved by AI. PHOTO: BT FILE

productive technologies complemented workers in the past by enabling them to work more efficiently, perform even higher-quality work, and to accomplish new tasks integral to productivity growth.

Given the tremendous capabilities of new technologies, there is no doubt that how they are used matters immensely. Technology must augment human capabilities and intelligence, instead of rendering human capabilities and intelligence irrelevant, or for people to be subjugated to non-human intelligence and imperatives.

Undoubtedly, how we use AI to augment human competencies and values will define whether technology enables or disables society.

The issues posed by AI are new, and yet not so new. AI is not a mere technological phenomenon. As it also operates within market capitalism – the dominant mode of organising the economic realm – this amplifies AI's growth, development and influence.

This concatenation of technology and capitalism can be described as "technological capitalism".

Technological capitalism cannot do without the guardrails of ethics and values. An economic system anchored in the logic of profit maximisation needs to be tempered with the imperative of sound values to ensure that the common good is promoted even as technology disrupts the status quo.

Need for values in our use of AI

For AI to generate sustainable societal value and be a force for good, the role of values in AI governance and regulation is increasingly recognised by governments, regulators and businesses.

Where it deliberately involves stakeholders, values can help to deal with governance deficits and gaps in regulatory environments and to manage the allocation of risks and costs.

If properly practised and imbibed as part of the DNA of a smart nation, values will catalyse beyond a compliance mindset to one which recognises that effective "values governance" in AI must be anchored in an ethical spine where responsibility, transparency and accountability are evident, recognised and supported.

The issue is not whether technology operates within a robust scheme of laws and values, but how to operationalise and practise values in a purposeful manner. This requires that values function not as a mere

add-on or afterthought in AI development, governance and regulation.

An AI framework of values (or, values in AI) can be the humanising force because it is grounded in moral reasoning and leadership. It also recognises that AI operates in the human environment – an ecosystem where interdependence and trust are essential.

The question is not why we need AI but how to ensure that appropriate individual, corporate and governmental conduct is manifested while ensuring that profits coexist within the framework of long-term sustainability.

Making AI a humanistic enterprise

The challenge for Singapore is to ensure that AI is a humanistic enterprise, in which value (economic and financial) and values (ethical and corporate) are not mutually exclusive but are symbiotically connected. To this end, the imperative of values such as fairness, openness, human dignity, public accountability is of fundamental importance.

These values, if properly given effect to, will grow trust and provide confidence that powerful technologies can be a force for good, of our economy and our well-being.

Ultimately, as we seek to deploy AI pervasively, it is timely that we ask ourselves the fundamental question: How do we want technology to serve us? This entails that we develop, share and nurture a common understanding of our core civic values vis-à-vis technology.

Without that, what the future portends can be scary. The history of technology has shown that shared purpose alone is inadequate in ensuring a technology is used properly. Its shared purpose must be disciplined and moulded by shared values.

In the push for Singapore to be an AI nation, the Singapore Spirit that PM Wong had described might offer an insight to how we can engage the powerful and disruptive new technologies.

"Singaporeans will have to take responsibility for one another and to shape the character and future of our society," he said.

This must be the imperative as we embrace AI.

The writer is associate professor of law at the Singapore Management University where he co-teaches an interdisciplinary course on harnessing new technologies for business and society