

Holding the line between people and algorithms

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Efficiency alone is not progress; technology must augment our humanity – not erode it. **By Eugene K B Tan**

ARTIFICIAL intelligence (AI) is becoming deeply embedded in our lives as it becomes more efficient, affordable and accessible. The workforce of the future will be a combination of people, intelligent agents and robots.

Fuelled by market capitalism and the quest for strong productivity gains, AI's growth, development and influence will be amplified. This convergence of technology and capitalism, or "technological capitalism", is fuelling record investments and usage.

But is the line between people and algorithms blurring, and should we be concerned? Will humanity become soulless if this distinction no longer exists? The issues posed by AI are novel and yet familiar. How we use these technologies will matter immensely.

Right-sizing AI's role in our societies

There is no single inevitable path in the development of new technology. AI should not be viewed as a mere technological phenomenon. In this era of pervasive algorithms, machines and chatbots are enabled to simulate human learning, comprehension, problem solving, decision making, creativity and autonomy.

Moreover, how AI is conceived, trained and deployed often presents congenital flaws such as in-built biases. This is why there needs to be an even-handed treatment between the economic benefits of harnessing new technologies and preserving the rights and dignity of people amid the disruption.

Given the push to mainstream AI in every facet of life, governments and stakeholders must explore and put in place the necessary regulatory framework to ensure such game-changing technologies will not undermine societies' social compact and the societal ethos.

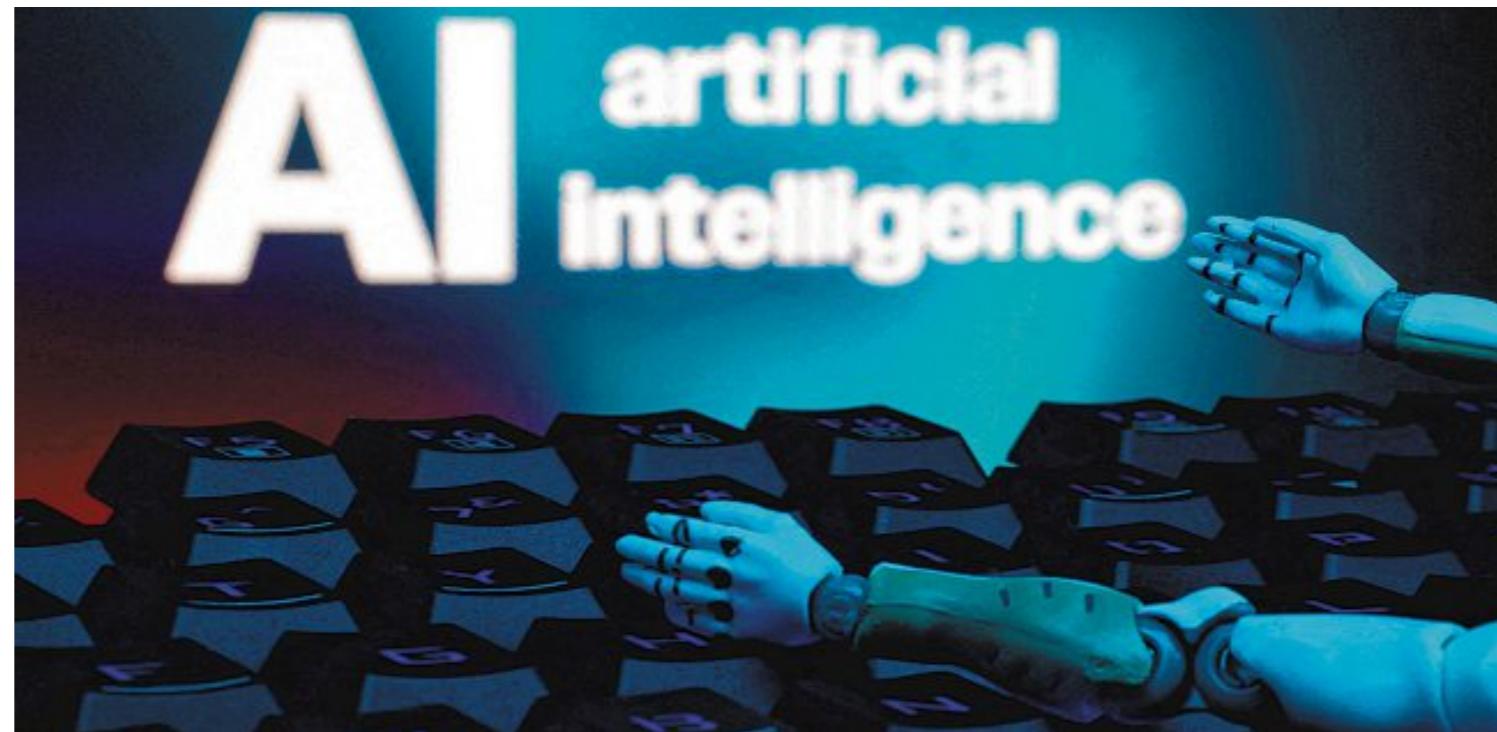
The bottom line is this: Technology must augment human capabilities and intelligence, instead of rendering these irrelevant, or worse, subjugating people to non-human imperatives. Undoubtedly, how AI augments or negates human competencies and values will define whether technology enables or disables society.

The regulatory framework, while largely about laws and policies, must be grounded in the appropriate role of AI in our societies. Technological capitalism cannot do without the guardrails of rights, ethics and values.

An economic system anchored in the logic of profit maximisation needs to be tempered by sound values and basic rights to ensure that the common good is promoted and protected. To this end, we must be clear on the desired individual, corporate and societal outcomes, with profits coexisting within the framework of long-term sustainability.

Making AI a humanistic enterprise

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



Answering the fundamental question of how AI should serve humanity demands that we develop, share and nurture a common understanding of our core civic values.

ILLUSTRATION: REUTERS

Where it purposefully involves and engages stakeholders, values can help deal with governance deficits and gaps in regulatory environments, and manage the equitable allocation of risks and costs. The use of AI must result in shaping a better world.

As part of the DNA of smart regulation, values will catalyse a movement beyond a compliance mindset. Effective regulation must have an ethical spine and rights-oriented motivation in which rights, responsibility, transparency and accountability are evident, recognised and realised.

Values, rights, and dignity of the human person must be the genesis and outcome of AI regulation – not an add-on or afterthought.

An AI framework of values can be the humanising force because it is grounded in moral reasoning and leadership and recognises that the human environment in which AI operates is an ecosystem where interdependence and trust are crucial.

The challenge, therefore, is to ensure that AI's development and use is a humanistic enterprise, in which economics and values are not mutually exclusive, but are symbiotically connected.

The values that undergird rights, such as fairness, openness, human dignity and public accountability, are of fundamental importance. These values, if properly given effect, will grow trust and confidence that powerful technologies can be a force for good for our economy and our well-being.

How do we want technology to serve us?

The history of technology has shown that shared purpose alone is inadequate in ensuring a technology is used properly. Shared purpose must be disciplined and moulded by shared values. They must be consciously integrated and infused in the design of AI systems.

Answering the fundamental question of how AI should serve humanity demands that we develop, share and nurture a common understanding of our core civic values.

Even as policymakers globally equate digital sovereignty with the pursuit of innova-

tion, technological capability and competitiveness, digital governance must be bolder and more comprehensive.

Global cooperation on AI governance has intensified but more can be done to legitimise the regulatory space in an interconnected digital environment. Events have shown that AI can be easily weaponised and undermine our democracy, way of life, rights and freedoms.

A stronger emphasis on fundamental values and rights also has the benefit of reinforcing corporate responsibility, growing social capital and buttressing democratic principles and the rule of law in a time of rapid change.

A vision of AI in society that embraces rights and values will reinforce trust and confidence in emerging technologies. Regulation grounded on internationally recognised rights and responsibilities and universally endorsed values and principles not only ensures that AI works for us but also reflects our common humanity.

Inherent human fallibility is magnified when we use technology with no regard to its consequences. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) underscores this persistent tension in human existence: We possess the ability, but often not the wisdom and moral courage to be accountable for our inventions. Moreover, our inventions, including AI, cannot be expected to understand the "life" and "knowledge" they have been programmed with.

The more pervasive and powerful the technology, the more we must ensure its responsible use. Only where the fundamental rights, dignity and worth of the human person are honoured will there be meaningful economic and social progress.

Only if the line between people and algorithms remains clear, will we appreciate what it means to be human in a technology-infused world and preserve our common humanity.

The more pervasive and powerful the technology, the more we must ensure its responsible use. Only where the fundamental rights, dignity and worth of the human person are honoured will there be meaningful economic and social progress.

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The writer is associate professor of law at the Singapore Management University. This essay is a revised version of remarks delivered at the Human Rights Day Seminar by the European Union Delegation to Singapore in December 2025