



DR SHARLENE THIAGARAJAH
TM Research & Development CEO

Protecting the core of AI

RAISE the topic of AI in any setting and you will face a deluge of conflicting opinions. On the flip side, proponents advocate that humanity will be better off in the next decade thanks to accelerated productivity and enhanced quality of life.

My take is that AI is here to stay and take flight whether we are ready or not. Whichever corner we stand in, now is the time for a multidisciplinary approach as we come together to develop frameworks for AI deployment and ensure the country is not left behind.

While people sing praises about AI and its potential, there is undoubtedly a darker side, for example, the potential for deep-fake tech manipulating digital content and spreading disinformation. Or the remote monitoring of people and devices from thousands of miles away.

In fact, experts have said that networked AI will amplify human efficiency but it will also pose a significant threat to decision-making, learning capabilities and knowledge retention.

The question is, who is really regulating all these and to what extent?

Broker for the right AI

Most AI technologies are from abroad. In healthcare, for example, AI was used in the early 1970s to perform early diagnosis tests in the US. Today, in Malaysia, these applications have helped healthcare professionals do things like analyse medical images much faster and more accurately.

Currently, we face the issue of AI bias. With generative AI technology envisioned to replicate a human's cognitive capabilities, search engines can be manipulated to show biased, inaccurate or even racist results. This is a real issue many countries are dealing with. Facial recognition and voice activation technology using AI has been used to commit fraud, identity theft, stalking and even harassment.

The idea of foreign tech being brought into Malaysia may be great, but

■ Multidisciplinary approach needed for AI to ensure Malaysia is not left behind

■ This calls for a renewed look at regulations and policies

■ Products developed through local R&D shall be given priority by MOSTI for local projects and tenders

it is crucial to have control over what comes in and on what terms, and how it is used. Only then can we be held accountable for what happens in our country and the changes it will drive.

This calls for a renewed look at regulations and policies, and the critical role of brokering to safeguard the fundamental components and capabilities that underpin the development of AI and its deployment.

The aim of brokering to harness the potential of AI while mitigating risks and ensuring it serves the broader interests of society can be seen through elements like ethical concerns, national security, economic competitiveness and social impact.

Countries like the US or Japan have a long history of investing heavily in research and innovation, and developing and distributing their inventions globally. As a relatively small economy, Malaysia is limited like

many other markets that often have no recourse but to "buy" new tech.

We can, however, pool our resources and focus on key areas to compete in the global environment. This starts first and foremost with safeguarding the resiliency of our technological infrastructure.

A sure-footed way to get that right is to ensure that support maintenance and ongoing management and upkeep of infrastructure platforms that enable critical operations and services, are our own and viewed as a strategic imperative.

Maintaining ownership and control over these fundamentals is vital in complex digital ecosystems. Relying on foreign service providers for support and maintenance has serious shortcomings. It introduces dependencies and vulnerabilities, and can compromise our ability to protect sensitive data and technological assets.

The Science, Technology & Innovation Ministry (MOSTI) has set a good example on how support is given, should we come up with our own technology and innovations. The MySTI is an initiative to further recognise products or services born from local R&D.

That's not all. Products developed through local R&D shall be given priority for local projects and tenders. Isn't that how it should be?

Charting the course of data sovereignty

According to Statista, revenue from AI software is expected to hit US\$126bil (RM601.73bil) by 2025. That is a lot of money to be protected for what is ours.

Data sovereignty has emerged as a critical issue in the realm of AI. As AI technologies permeate every aspect of our lives, the vast reservoirs of data fuelling these innovations have become prized commodities. Growing concerns over privacy and data protection have intensified in the wake of high-profile data breaches and scandals. Yet, there are ways and methods to protect what belongs to us.

The sooner we realise that the principle of geographical sovereignty is slowly but surely being transformed into that of digital sovereignty, the quicker policies and protection strategies can be developed hand in hand.

Right now, there are regulations and laws to shape the landscape of this area. The MCMC has a regulatory framework aimed at protecting what's ours. So, what is hindering Malaysians from becoming experts in AI of our own?

Navigating the steep path towards AI-driven prosperity is not for the faint-hearted as we strike the balance between progress and precaution. I am confident we have the brains, talents and yes, gumption to pull this off.