
Artificial and Yet Real: Artificial Intelligence—From Warfare to Welfare

A Presentation by Liberato C. Bautista¹

at the

XXIII Infopoverty World Conference under the auspices of the Observatory for Digital Communications (OCCAM) and collaborators

“A.I. turmoils digital processes: how to act to ensure human rights and provide e-welfare for all?”

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Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you, Mr. Civili, chair, for the kind introduction.

I want to thank Pierpaolo Saporito, president of OCCAM and the intellectual architect behind these Infopoverty Conferences, for including me and the Conference of NGOs in Consultative Status with the UN (CoNGO) again in this year’s conference. I cannot recall how many times I have spoken at these conferences, possibly 10 of the 23.

This year’s infopoverty conference theme continues the orientation toward human rights, global solidarity, and e-welfare, which are crucial if we address what this conference's objectives describe as “critical gaps,” naming, among others, food security, health, and education.

I cannot agree more. The twin foci of eliminating hunger and eradicating poverty distill the 17 SDGs into a framework that matters to humanity's survival and the planet's sustainability. Hunger and poverty, peace and sustainability are words comprehensible to ordinary people experiencing economic hardships, political instabilities, and social and health inequalities.

How exciting it would be if AI were oriented to achieving these!

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The digitization of information and the digitalization of knowledge must be oriented to the specific proposition of communications justice and the larger social justice project.

AI is fast-moving and expensive for struggling economies to fund. Unless regulated, it will leave others behind, widening existing social, digital, and gender gaps and inequalities.

Indigenous peoples, whose indigenous knowledge is digitally archived, are asking—with no electricity and computers on the reservation—will we have access again in the future to our knowledge base, which is being digitalized?

Some young people in Africa are asking their governments—by digitalizing information on the SDGs, isn't it a violation of our human rights if we did not have electronic access to such information due to lack of electricity and computers in our homes and villages?

As this panel suggests, a holistic approach is needed, but even more so, one that ingrains human rights and social justice values to ensure e-welfare is true welfare for all.

Could A.I. be harnessed to achieve such ends?

The theme and argument for this opening panel point to the necessity of a “holistic approach” to AI, recognizing that it “presents both risks and opportunities for human well-being.” The use of the word “turmoils” in the conference’s theme caught my attention, asserting what it said is the predominant use of AI in warfare {and surveillance } rather than in welfare. Indeed, today, military and defense spending (warfare) far exceeds by leaps and bounds spending in social safety nets (welfare).

How can we use ICTs, including AI, in the service of humanity? How can we use these technologies to serve humanity and people’s longings for economic justice, human rights, participatory democracy, and more?

In a world where fear is in excess, and hope is in deficit, the use of technologies, including AI, when they multiply such fear and deflate such hope, does not augur well for achieving peace and prosperity for people and the planet—the Agenda 2030 mantra.

Such thinking is on the agenda of CoNGO when it meets on April 28 in Bangkok during the UN ESCAP annual meetings. A panel will address the topic AI: Artificial and Yet Real,” exploring how AI might serve humanity’s survival and the planet’s sustainability.

At the 2021 Infopoverty conference, I posited that “the digitization of knowledge and information and the digitalization of the same are fraught with moral and ethical considerations.

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Talking about the digital divide and digital inequalities points to some of these moral and ethical issues because they intersect with larger economic, political, social, and cultural divides.

“Because communication is intrinsic to our humanity and the relations we build, the right to communication and access to information are “basic human rights, essential to human dignity and a just and democratic society.”

Building a future with technologies changing by the second and a future besieged by intersecting health and social pandemics is commendable at best and mission impossible at worst.

I am pleased that both CoNGO and OCCAM are conduits of the ongoing multilateral processes arising from the World Summit on Information Society in Geneva (2003) and Tunis (2005). We have joined forces at the annual WSIS Forums in Geneva, where issues such as ICTs for SDGs are prime agenda items.

CoNGO welcomes the UN General Assembly resolution on “Seizing the opportunities of safe, secure and trustworthy artificial intelligence systems for sustainable development,” issued on 21 March 2024. I hope today's deliberations provide input to the Summit of the Future in September, including the Zero Draft of the Pact for the Future, primarily as it addresses the digital society through a Digital Compact.

CoNGO is drafting a working paper on the Summit of the Future, with the placeholder title, “The Present in the Future Tense: The Grammar and Implements of a Just, Peaceable, Inclusive, and Sustainable Future.” This conference will inform the drafting.

These ethical lenses bring subsidiary but intrinsic values to "Information Communications Technology." Justice, sustainability, and participatory democracy are ethical values at the core of the voice and agency of human beings who are conscious producers and consumers of digitalized knowledge and information.

A strong moral compass is needed to direct digital communication to the ethical true north whose elements constitute the respect for peace and the fundamental values of freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, shared responsibility, and respect for nature.

Crucial to the principle of access and stewardship in the use of information communications technology is the recognition of vulnerable and marginalized peoples, especially migrants, internally displaced peoples, older persons, people with disabilities, and refugees. Will their real knowledge figure in artificial intelligence?

Ladies and gentlemen,

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The Digital Society we ought to foster must be peaceable and secure—for the people and the planet. By security, I mean beyond national security into human and planetary security. I am excited about this year's Infopoverty conference because it covers these and more.

Thank you for your kind attention.

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