

Unleashing the power of AI in Africa: Expert insights and predictions

 By Imran Salie

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Artificial intelligence has become the talk of the town in 2023, thanks to OpenAI's ChatGPT, which has taken the world by storm. Generative AI has also created a storm it seems, as it's reportedly being misused to plagiarise. In May 2023, near halfway through the year, it's good to take a step back and evaluate how AI in general will impact us as humans in the future. This leads us to the recent Africa Tech Week, where we tuned into a panel discussion around the topic of navigating the future of AI.



The discussion was moderated by broadcaster and tech enthusiast Bobby Brown and included the following panellists: Lavina Ramkissoon, AI ethics and technology policy expert at the Africa Union; Ayanda Ngcebetsa, data and AI director at Microsoft; Keneilwe Gwabeni, CIO at Telkom Consumer and Small Business; and Professor Arthur Mutambara, executive director at the Institute for the Future of Knowledge (IFK) at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) in South Africa.

Viewing AI as an extension of yourself in the future

Notably, Brown explained that because there are fewer Africans online than anywhere else in the world, machine learning is currently not learning enough about Africa and Africans, which could possibly be a downside for the continent when it comes to AI.

Ramkissoon, however, believes that it comes down to how we frame it. She said: "I actually would see and view AI as an extension of who I am and I would also see it as a reflection of who I am, and that's just a combination of my psychological and my technologist view together."

“That’s mainly because the way that we frame something is pretty much how we would then treat it going forward, and it becomes important to remind ourselves continuously that it is just a tool.

“AI as a whole. This is really the fluff stuff that we talk about, where there are way cooler things that are actually happening on the back end. So, it is important in terms of how we frame it.”

The good, the bad and the ugly

Generative AI like ChatGPT is a tool that should be used with responsibility. While it can make our lives easier, we should be aware and mindful of how we use it and what we use it for. We cannot solely rely on generative AI to provide us with facts and information, instead, we should always fact-check what it generates for us, and we should double-check that its responses are accurate and in alliance with our prompts. Gwabeni echoed similar thoughts on the prospect of AI changing the course of how we navigate our lives.

“Generative is going to enhance our abilities, it’s going to help us solve difficult problems, and it’s going to help us challenge what we face as a continent and globally. We’re going to have 1,000s of intelligent people as a result of AI and that brings with it solutions to the problems that us individually, using our human intelligence, cannot otherwise solve.

“Netcare deployed a robotic to help them with surgery. Yes, that’s exciting. That’s the power of AI. This means operations are going to be much more precise, they’re going to be much more effective. So that’s the good that comes with it.”

Gwabeni, however, said that AI is indeed replacing jobs, which can be seen as the ugly aspect of AI.



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“It is indeed taking jobs. Looking at the rate of adopting and creating these jobs versus the rapid growth of technology, we want to feel that pinch a bit before we catch up and close that gap,” she said.

Addressing the inherent bias in AI

Another topic that was addressed was the inherent bias in AI. This refers to the unintentional or implicit bias that can be present in AI systems due to various factors such as the data they were trained on.

Professor Mutambara emphasised the importance of diversity in the development of AI to avoid bias and discrimination in AI products and applications. He called for more women, young people, Black people and Africans to be involved in the programming of AI systems to ensure diversity in the development process.



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Mutambara also cautioned against complacency in assuming that AI will not surpass human intelligence, citing the

exponential growth of AI and the potential for AI to create knowledge beyond what the programmer intended.

"We have a duty and obligation as regulators, as government, as the private sector to make sure we're not just users. We're also participants in the construction of these machines," the professor said.

The potential of generative AI for enhancing professional expertise

Lastly, going forward, there's plenty of potential for the use of generative AI for enhancing professional expertise.

Ngcebetsha said: "I think for me, what's important to understand is that generative AI is not just about searching and retrieving information, it's about creating net new content and knowledge. When ChatGPT launched to the public, many of us were excited to try it out and see what it could do. We quickly realised that its capabilities went beyond just generating responses to our queries, but could actually help us generate new content that we never would have thought of before.

"This has huge implications for professionals across industries, including clinicians who can use generative AI models to accelerate the provision of clinical expertise for their patients. However, I think there's still a lack of understanding about generative AI and its potential. We need more education to help us fully realise how it can enhance what we do rather than take away intelligence. Ultimately, I believe that the more we understand generative AI, the more we will see its potential to accelerate development across industries."

ABOUT IMRAN SALIE

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