



Predestination by PHD Malaysia focused on the inevitable coming of AI

IMAGINE a future where tasks are fully automated and powered by artificial intelligence (AI). It need not look so different from the present day, as the process is already well under way. In fact, the technology has been incorporated so seamlessly into our daily lives that it has become second nature to us.

A report from Research and Markets estimates the global AI market to be worth US\$23.4 bil (approximately RM103.7 bil) by 2025. And while the idea that machines will be monitoring and managing every move humans make one day may set off alarm bells, PHD Malaysia head Eileen Ooi and PHD Asia-Pacific regional head of strategy and planning Chris Stephenson believe that AI solutions should be embraced as enablers rather than human substitutes.

This was a central theme at *Predestination*, an event organised by PHD Malaysia — the local arm of global media company PHD Worldwide (PHD) — to explore the inevitable coming of AI, which saw keynote speakers Ooi and Stephenson tracing the history, evolution and eventual birth of the technology as well as its implications on the marketing industry, followed by a panel discussion.

Keeping up with AI

As AI continues to permeate our daily lives, it raises a number of concerns. With regard to marketing, these revolve around the potential impact AI might have upon the field. In terms of infrastructure, Ooi believes that the country is more than ready to accommodate the emergent technology. “We have already achieved close to 80% in terms of digital penetration and 140% in mobile penetration, so in actual fact, we are very developed as a nation,” she says.

She points out that Malaysia has moved from 3G (third generation) to 4G (fourth generation) mobile connections in a relatively short span of time. And as consumer demand continues to drive telecommunications companies towards large-scale investments in data bandwidth, the technology sector will continue to grow as well.



Ooi believes that local infrastructure is more than ready to handle the next phase of AI

Rather, the problem lies in the industry’s familiarity with the technology, which Ooi admits is still not quite up to the mark yet despite AI-powered features like chatbots being widely used in the e-commerce sphere. “Honestly, we’re still at a very early stage of growth for AI. We do have a lot of technology start-ups and agencies that are already investing in this space, but marketers and consumers are often not as aware as they could be that AI is around us already,” she says.

She attributes this to the fact that Malaysians have

been less exposed to conversations about AI as they have been to discussions about other fields of technology, such as big data. “For the past two or three years, at every single industry event, we have heard about data, data and data. I think PHD is at the forefront because yes, it is data but ultimately, the difference lies in what that data does. And it’s the AI powering the algorithms behind all that data that actually make it more meaningful for the consumers,” she says.

During the Cannes Lions festival in 2016, PHD launched its Cannes 360 initiative, which uses virtual reality technology to produce a series of short films that were subsequently uploaded onto the company’s YouTube channel for viewing. Ooi reveals that ever since then, more people have been prompted to talk about AI, and with Malaysians being very quick to accept new behaviours and trends in general, she believes that having more dialogues on the topic would ramp up the adoption rate.

“As marketers, the more we talk about it, the more we exemplify how the future is indeed inevitable. How can we navigate today so that we can be ready for tomorrow? That, ultimately, is what PHD’s DNA is about,” she says.

The future is now

With artificial intelligence set to change the way we do almost everything, what implications does it hold for marketing?



(From left): PHD Malaysia head of strategy and platforms Jessey Chew moderating the panel discussion with Hyperlab CEO Vic Sithasanan and Stephenson

Job (in)security

One of the key technology trends brought up during *Predestination* was personalisation, with applications like Snapchat, Facebook and Google using algorithms that learn from users’ online behaviours to feed them preferred content.

“As consumers, we are used to things being personalised for us, such as having articles suggested to us that match our preferences. Marketers have to realise that it’s not about broadcasting on a mass scale, but about looking at personalisation. That’s one of the driving forces at PHD, we really push for in terms of niche targeting,” says Ooi.

With the undeniable benefits AI brings to performance optimisation, does this mean that jobs traditionally held by humans will soon be overtaken by technology and machines? While that is true to an extent — a study conducted by two Oxford University professors predicts that 47% of jobs in the US will be automated within the next two decades — Ooi emphasises that there is no need to panic.

“The immediate areas where we will see that change is in operations, because AI will do it faster and better, but what that means is that AI will create new opportunities for humans in different realms and different areas of work,” she notes.

While agreeing that technology will replace certain job functions, Ooi also stresses that humans should view AI as partners rather than as competition, particularly in marketing, where it will become a boon to strategists due to its ability to analyse and process data faster. This, in turn, leaves more time and energy for them to focus on other tasks, to achieve the best results for their clients.

Ooi sums up the relationship between humans and technology by stating that at the end of the day, it still falls back to the strategist to incorporate emotions and other intangible aspects into the brand. “AI can become an enabler for strategists, but I do not see AI replacing humans in the sense that the world will be run by them. It will not be Terminator, it will not be humans against them. It’s a collaboration. AI will help empower humans and will push us to evolve into new places we can only imagine,” she concludes.

