

Speech: Jeremy Wright speaking at the AI Summit

Thank you very much.

AI Summit is one of the highlights of London Tech Week and it's a real pleasure to be with you here this morning.

The word summit in this context was actually coined by Winston Churchill in the 1950s, and in many ways Churchill was an AI pioneer, although he wouldn't have known it at the time.

In 1941, he set up the Central Statistical Office with the aim of 'ensuring coherence of statistical information' across various departments.

The reason was that he knew that the more sophisticated the data we had, the more it could be shared and the greater benefits that could result.

And as a tribute, one of our Government's biggest data analysis programmes is now called Churchill.

Because all connections, no matter how big or small, can spark conversations, innovations and new opportunities. That is what makes AI so exciting and that is why we are all here today.

Technology is at its most powerful when it is no longer novel but ubiquitous and cheap.

And when technology drives down the cost of sharing and processing information, the consequences can be phenomenal.

This is what is taking place with AI and the pace of change is only going to get exponentially greater in the coming years.

And the challenge for all of us is how we wrestle with the incredible force of these new technologies and channel it for the common good.

Our digital economy is leading the world, powered by these new technologies like AI.

The UK is Europe's leading tech hub and we generate more billion dollar tech businesses than any other country on the continent.

And our inward AI investment stood at one billion pounds last year, more than Germany, France, Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland combined.

But this is only part of the picture, albeit an important part.

We also need to channel the societal benefits of emerging tech, and protect against those who want to use and develop technology in a harmful way.

Because the opportunities are far too great to be lost because as a society could not agree the right path.

So I wanted to talk today about the work we are doing as a Government to get this right and to make the most of AI.

AI Sector Deal

Our Industrial Strategy identified AI and data as one of four Grand Challenges, an area where the UK has the potential to lead the world for years to come.

Because we have all the right conditions for success.

World leading universities, great access to finance and trusted public institutions like the NHS that can pioneer data-driven innovation.

And we have so many organisations at the cutting edge – in biomedicine, law, finance, research, cybersecurity – that all can become even stronger through using AI in their operations, products and services.

To capitalise on this, we launched our AI Sector Deal last year, with around a billion pounds of support for the sector, including contributions from Government, industry and academia.

Since the publication of that Deal, the momentum has continued and we have seen a raft of major announcements to promote the positive use of AI all across the UK.

That includes the establishment of the new Government-backed Bayes Centre in Edinburgh, a world-leading hub for data science and AI.

Fifty million pounds for five new centres of excellence for digital pathology and imaging, including radiology, using AI medical advances.

And from this Autumn, completely exempting PhD-level roles from the visa caps.

But there is still so much more to do. AI is getting smarter and faster and so Governments need to work hard to keep pace.

And there are two important areas that I see as crucial if we are to succeed in this AI revolution – a strong skills base and clear ethical foundations.

Skills

First, skills. AI, like all transformative technologies, is due to have a profound impact on our labour market.

And the best way to futureproof our economy is to make sure we have a digitally skilled workforce at all levels.

And there is a clear demand for one. A report released today by Tech Nation and Dealroom shows there were 1.7 million digital tech economy job openings

across the UK last year.

And that new technologies are creating roles with salaries that are on average 10 per cent higher than average.

We cannot choose whether AI will be transformative but we can choose whether these exciting new jobs will be created here in the UK.

So we can capitalise on these new jobs, whilst supporting those who need to retrain.

Because digital skills cannot be seen as an add-on. They are fundamental to success in the digital age.

And it is the role of Governments and employers to provide an environment where people can develop these skills.

Digital learning is not the preserve of classrooms and lecture halls. The rapid pace of change means that we will all need to keep learning so we can keep abreast of the skills we need.

The Government is already offering a whole spectrum skills package, from lifelong digital skills training through the Digital Skills Partnership to a revamped Computer Science curriculum in schools.

That is alongside a new adult digital skills entitlement to support basic training and a new National Retraining Scheme to help people re-skill and up-skill as the economy changes.

We are also investing 84 million pounds in a new National Centre for Computing Education, led by some of the UK's leading tech experts, to give teachers the subject knowledge and support they need to teach the next generation of talent.

And only this week, the Prime Minister announced that we will invest up to 13.5 million pounds in new conversion courses to grow specialist AI and Data skills.

This scheme will provide another 2,500 places at universities throughout England, and will sponsor up to 1,000 of those places to improve diversity and representation in the future AI workforce.

Diversity and ethics

Diversity in the tech sector is important. Not just because it is morally right, but because it is critical to addressing some of the challenges we face as a society.

And just as we encourage diversity in public life, because it improves decision making and leads to a greater diversity of thought, the same applies for technology too.

Businesses that understand their customers and communities and give them what

they want will be those that thrive, especially in competitive and fast moving industries like AI.

And diversity is particularly important for this sector. The algorithms and structures that govern AI will only be effective if they do not reflect the subconscious biases of the programmers who create them.

So a diverse workforce is imperative if we are to shape this technology for good.

And the Government is passionate about getting the foundations of this technology right, and playing our part in the global debates.

Whilst we are optimistic about the potential of AI, it raises many new ethical questions, that would have seemed like issues from science fiction only a few years ago.

Last week Microsoft asked for greater guidance for how to handle facial recognition data because of the “broad societal ramifications and potential for abuse”.

These are exactly the kind of issues that we want to explore through our recently established Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation.

It’s a world-leading advisory body designed to make sure data and AI delivers the best possible outcomes for society, in support of their innovative and ethical use.

The Centre is already working on some groundbreaking projects, including reviews on the use of online targeting, and the potential for bias in the use of algorithms.

Just as countries came together to set new standards for protecting personal data through GDPR, now is the time to seek solutions to the ethical challenges that lie even further ahead.

Because there is a real threat that emerging issues like deep fakes and state-sponsored disinformation will colour the public’s perception of new technologies and act as a barrier to adoption.

We all have a part to play in setting out a positive vision for AI and how it can make our journeys safer, our environment cleaner and our services smarter.

But we can only do this if we can give assurances that we are pursuing a safe and ethical path for this technology.

Our work on data trusts is one example of this.

As we all know, data is the infrastructure upon which AI services are built.

And the free flow of information and of data is fundamental to the advancement of innovation and growth.

But it has to take place within frameworks that respect the rights of organisations and individuals to whom that data pertains.

They need to know about it, and consent to it, and they need to be assured that it is being used in the way they expect – delivering better services to them as individuals, or unlocking untapped value of their data for organisations.

That's why, earlier this year, the Office for AI worked with the Open Data Institute to pilot data trusts.

This is a world first, bringing together organisations taking the first steps to sharing data in a safe, fair and ethical way to tackle global problems.

Like food waste, the international illegal wildlife trade, and sharing urban data to deliver better services to citizens.

This pilot has been illuminating. And it has made it clear how building a consensus in this area, not just between organisations, but between nations, is so important.

And the UK is a leader in this field.

AI technologies are infinitely replicable. If one of us builds a technology then it is open for all.

So to make the most of new digital technologies, we need to work together and build common ground.

It is more important than ever that we work with like minded companies, organisations and countries, to make sure new technologies develop in a way that reflects our shared democratic values.

Conclusion

Because no technology is intrinsically good or harmful.

History will only show that the AI revolution is a successful one if we work hard to put the right conditions in place.

And that means access to digital skills so everyone can benefit and the ethical foundations to steer it in the right direction.

In this week of all weeks, let us celebrate the progress we have made in making the UK a natural home for this exciting new technology.

And let's renew our efforts to make sure we keep the flame burning brighter and to make sure this technology remains transformative, safe and open.

Because if we get this right, AI can be the motor behind a healthier economy and a fairer economy.

And that is what we must aspire to in this digital age.

Thank you very much.