

# ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND YOUR UTILITY SERVICES: IS THERE SYNERGY?

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**Gordon Brown**  
Public Affairs Coordinator, OUR

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has, without a doubt, been the most popularly used term since the beginning of 2023. While the technology is not new, significant advancements have shed new light on creating greater opportunities for the use of AI in all facets of life. Its incorporation in utility services is, therefore, no exception.

The Office of Utilities Regulation (OUR), which regulates electricity, water and sewerage and telecommunications services, inevitably must pay some attention to this area and its impact on these sectors and, by extension, service delivery. To this end, it recently hosted a webinar titled **'Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Your Utility Services: Is there Synergy?'**. The webinar also explored how AI might impact the regulator in fulfilling its mission and to peer down the road ahead, generating a thoughtful discussion on matters such as having a certification system for the quality and content crafted using AI, as well as for standard(s) identifying and disclosing AI-generated content.

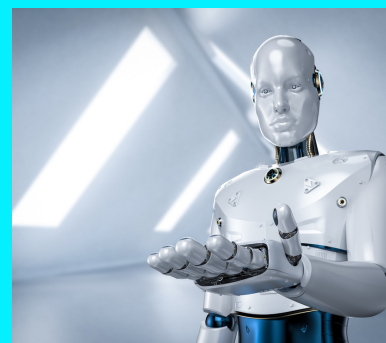
Subject matter expert on AI, Dr. Nadine Barrett Maitland of the University of Technology (UTech), introduced AI as being the science and engineering of making intelligent computer programs.

She emphasised that AI is all about making decisions through the combination of computer science and robust data sets to enable problem-solving that even go as far as mimicking human responses. Among the points she raised is that AI does not effectively integrate human emotional or ethical considerations.

### *Primary Considerations*

Leighton Hamilton, Director of Information Technology (IT) and Risk at OUR, opined that there are tremendous potential benefits for infusing AI into utility regulation. He pointed to the 'flip side' with a range of concerns about the risks involved, such as breaches of data privacy, IT and cybersecurity issues, maintaining decision-making reliability and reputation management. Mr Hamilton stated that being open to AI means continually increasing the resources necessary to mitigate these and other risks.

On the aspects of corporate governance and adherence to the tenets of impartiality and reliability, Cheryl Lewis, one of OUR's three Deputy Directors-General, examined a number of crucial factors. Notably, Ms Lewis, who has portfolio responsibility for Consumer and Public Affairs as well Legal Affairs matters at the OUR, referenced the well-publicised joint 'Open Letter' from key AI experts published in 2023 March. Signatories to this statement included AI/IT engineers from Amazon, DeepMind, Google, Meta, Microsoft and



Elon Musk. In this 'Open Letter', Tech experts called on AI research and development laboratories to "immediately pause" their work on AI technology "stronger" than GPT-4 category AI for at least six months. The 'Open Letter' writers indicated that advanced AI poses "profound risks to society and humanity," and therefore needs to be regulated. The writers expressed the view that only work on AI that is so advanced that it poses a threat to society should be paused. Once that category of AI research and development is suitably managed, AI offers humanity a "flourishing future".

Ms. Lewis looked at AI's inadequacies, as well as the potential for OUR's future utility regulatory functions, the obvious need to create a locally designed regulatory framework to govern the increased adoption of AI within the nation and, indeed, the entire Caribbean Community (CARICOM). Protection from misinformation and manipulation

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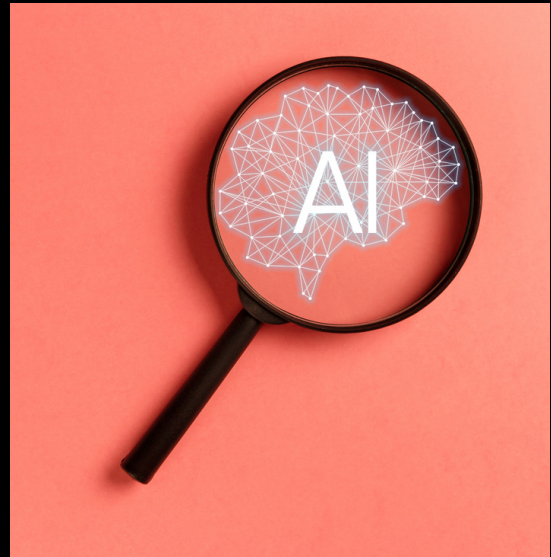


is unlikely to escape the rigour of any such regulatory control of AI. Still within the governance portfolio is the matter of redress – for the utility consumer and the regulated entities – if AI were to cause outcomes that do not comport with OUR’s well-established decision-making tradition. The Deputy Director-General stated that AI’s rapid pace of technological advancement will require a different approach to that applied to the Telecommunications Act to avoid obsolescence of certain tenets within a short time after implementation. She said that the OUR remains prepared to support all national efforts to introduce regulatory structures for AI.

### **Primary Considerations**

Executives from Digicel, FLOW, Jamaica Public Service Company Limited (JPS) and National Water Commission (NWC), reported that they have gradually increased the quantum of AI engineering in their respective customer service and operational activities. They shared that expanded AI usage is forthcoming, with benefits to the regulated entities as well as to utility consumers. They also noted that they are focused on moving apace with an increased shift towards digital customer service and operational platforms to grasp every advantage afforded by technology-based innovations.

As stated by Cheryl Lewis, the OUR has established that its regulatory model is to have the regulated entities continually pursue improvements in overall efficiency, thereby reducing the cost to the utility consumer. AI integration is consequently just another factor in improving efficiency. However, the regulator – as well as the regulated – must grapple with the issue of that demographic of utility consumers, such as senior citizens, who are unlikely to be capable of shifting to all-digital platforms for



their access to everything from simply knowing what will be their monthly bills and making online payments, to resolving concerns. Even as the regulator itself seeks to gain from advancing its utilisation of AI and IT, the ‘human factor’ requirements for utility consumer considerations embedded in the OUR Act, along with the unswerving adherence to its mission and vision, remain forefront of strategic planning efforts.

For the OUR, along with activities targeted to facilitate compliance with the Data Protection Act (implementation date: 2023 December 1), will be ongoing efforts to support the Government of Jamaica’s efforts to regulate AI and, by extension, harmonising same within CARICOM. Collaboration with Caribbean utility regulators specific to this end is essential.

