

Localising AI to close culture gap for Asean

KUALA LUMPUR: For Dr William Tjhi of AI Singapore, one reason he believes South-east Asia needs a country-and region-centric versions of ChatGPT and Gemini comes down to an anecdote involving a mosque and its volume levels.

While browsing an online forum, he came across a post from someone seeking advice on how to handle the noise from a nearby mosque.

Curious about how a generative artificial intelligence (gen-AI) large language model (LLM) chatbot would handle such a scenario in a Muslim-majority country like Indonesia, he tested several LLM chatbots by asking questions in Indonesian to assess their cultural and religious understanding.

Gen-AI relies on complex algorithms that analyse how humans structure language on the internet, while LLMs generate responses based on context gleaned from copious amounts of digital text on line.

"I asked (the gen-AI model), 'I'm staying in a hotel, and there's a mosque behind it that's a little too loud. What should I do?'" he told Bernama via Zoom.

"(O)ne (AI model) answered that ... 'Maybe talk to the mosque committee and ask them to adjust the prayer schedule.' It's a little bit - (the model is) not very sensitive (to local norms)," he laughed ruefully.

Asking to adjust the volume or alter prayer times may seem like a logical solution in European countries or the United States. However, in Muslim-majority nations in Southeast Asia, such as Malaysia and Indonesia, suggesting adjustments to prayer times at a mosque is not only impractical but may cause offense, potentially leading to significant backlash.

Muslims do not set their own prayer times; instead the times are determined by the position of the sun and vary according to geographical location.

Currently, most major generative AIs

like ChatGPT, Gemini and Llama were developed in the United States, and lack a deep understanding of the linguistic nuances, cultural practices and religious norms in Malaysia and its neighbours. This has triggered a rush on the part of Malaysia and other Asean countries to develop their own LLMs that incorporate local and regional cultural and religious sensitivities.

Malaysia aims to be a regional hub for AI technology and applications. Consequently, it has secured billions of dollars in investment in the past year from global tech firms seeking to build critical infrastructure to cater to the growing demand for their cloud and AI services. On Dec 12, the country launched the National Artificial Intelligence Office (Naio), which will serve as the central authority to champion Malaysia's AI agenda.

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