

We the People are the Superintelligence

Right Livelihood Lecture, University of Zurich, Dec. 4, 2025

Good evening, Zurich.

It is a great honor to be speaking with you at the University of Zurich as a 2025 Right Livelihood laureate.

I am particularly pleased to be in Switzerland. This nation holds a unique place in the world on the strength of its long-standing policy of neutrality and as a protector of those lacking access to formal channels of diplomacy. At a time when regional conflicts dominate global headlines, Switzerland's humanitarian traditions, and commitment to mediation and international cooperation are more important than ever before.

This spirit of bridging divides and fostering consensus is exactly what I wish to discuss tonight. Our democracies face unprecedented challenges in the digital spaces where we connect, debate and make sense of reality.

I will begin with a personal story about a crack. When I was five, doctors diagnosed me with a life-threatening heart condition. They told my family I had only a 50 percent chance of surviving until surgery. Every night going to sleep felt like a coin toss.

This instilled in me an urgency, an urgency to “publish before I perish.” Essentially, I recorded everything I learned on a daily basis. First, on tapes, then floppy disks and finally the internet.

Along the way, I discovered something profound. If you publish perfection online, people tend to click like and scroll away. But if you publish something imperfect, something rich in vulnerabilities and half-formed thoughts, these cracks invite participation. People correct, engage and co-create. As the late, great Leonard Cohen sang, “There’s a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.”

For democracies, this is key. We must see the cracks in our world — broken trust, polarization, environmental crises — not as reasons for despair, but as invitations for collaboration, openings for light.

But we must also be honest. Today, many of these cracks are widened by the dominant logic of our digital age. I call this logic the Max OS: an operating system designed to maximize one thing above all else. In the digital realm, the maximizing instruction is applied to human relationships, leading to catastrophic results.

About 10 years ago, many social media outfits switched from simple feeds, where you saw the content of the people you chose to follow, to a parasitic engine. This engine maximizes engagement. Clicks. Watch time. Such systems, powered by AI, learned something troubling: the easiest way to maximize human attention is not through nuance or understanding. It is through outrage.

If you see content that builds relationships, you might reflect on it, perhaps go offline and have a flesh and blood discussion. You do not stay glued to the screen. But if you see something that attacks your values, fuels division or

amplifies extremes, it sparks outrage and you are hooked, addicted to the screen, eager to fight.

This has led to an environment of very high PPM. I do not mean CO2 parts per million, I mean polarization per minute. For the past decade, this has morphed our social feeds into adrenaline factories. Such an environment of fractured trust paralyzes our ability to take collective action, and it is exactly what authoritarians exploit.

To compound matters, we are introducing increasingly powerful generative artificial intelligence into this polarized system. We are entering the era of “slop” — content with zero relational nutrition, optimized purely to keep us addicted.

Right now, we often talk about being the “human-in-the-loop” of AI. But too often, this feels like a hamster on a wheel. The hamster is running faster and faster, perhaps feeling productive, but it has zero control over the direction of the wheel.

The critical question is not, “Should we accelerate or stop AI?” The critical question is, “Who steers AI?” I believe we must take control of the steering wheel. We must move from “human-in-the-loop-of-AI” to “AI-in-the-loop-of-humanity.”

In a nutshell, it means no longer using AI as addictive intelligence, designed to keep us scrolling. We start using it as assistive intelligence, designed to help us listen to one another.

In Taiwan, a unique array of environmental, geopolitical and social pressures make us good listeners. We are the number one global target for polarization

attacks. But we adapted and evolved. We learned what I call a geothermal way of facing conflicts.

The friction of differences, the magma of conflict, do not need to be treated as a volcano from which we must flee. By listening deeply to the earth — in a social fabric sense — we can convert the heat into powerful co-creative energy. The anti-social corners of social media can be built into pro-social architectures.

Let me give you an example. Ten years ago, when ride-sharing services like Uber came to Taiwan, it triggered intense conflict between those who welcomed the convenience of the sharing economy and the traditional taxi unions who wanted to protect their livelihoods. The online debate was toxic.

So, we invited everyone into the new Polis digital space, a system designed for listening and seeing each other’s feelings. There were crucial differences from regular social media. First, there was no reply or retweet button, there was no way to dunk on someone just to score points. You could only share your own feelings or agree/disagree with others.

As you participated, you could see your avatar moving toward people who shared your feelings — your community. And then the system prioritized bridging statements. The ideas that went viral were not the extremes. They were the ideas that resonated across divides — the statements that got upvotes from both sides of the room. In just three weeks, we mapped where the people actually agreed. It turned out that most agreed on most things. The real issue was we lacked a way to see it.

We transformed that intense conflict into a coherent set of laws that the majority could live with. I call this finding the uncommon ground. This system

is now widely used globally, more commonly known as Community Notes on X, for instance.

We can use this same approach for emerging challenges, using modern AI to scale this process into broad listening. Last year, Taiwan faced a wave of AI-powered deepfake scams. You would open social media and see ads featuring famous CEOs, like Jensen Huang of Nvidia, offering investment advice. It looked like him, it sounded like him, but it was most definitely not him.

We needed a solution. But being the most free in Asia when it comes to internet freedom, we cannot censor speech. So, we turned to the people. We sent 200,000 text messages to random numbers around Taiwan asking, “How can we solve this issue together?” Thousands volunteered, and we chose a statistically representative microcosm of the population.

This mini-public met online in an Alignment Assembly, using AI as assistive intelligence. The AI helped facilitate and weave together the ideas from 45 different discussion rooms in just an afternoon — a process that usually takes human facilitators a week.

They came up with brilliant, coherent solutions. For example: One room suggested labeling any advertisement as “probably a scam” until the advertiser digitally signs off on it. Another room said, if someone loses 7 million dollars to an unsigned investment scam, let us make the platform liable for the full 7 million dollars of damage.

We did not just “read the air” — trying to guess what the social norms should be. We “wrote the air” together, ensuring everyone shares the common knowledge of what society prefers.

Over 85 percent of participants agreed on the final package. This clear signal of public will convinced our parliament. The laws were passed within months, and now, those deepfake ads are down by more than 90 percent.

This is the geothermal engine in action. It demonstrates that we can use digitalization to promote democracy and build consensus, even on controversial issues.

But for this vision to thrive, the systems I just described need to be open and locally governed. We cannot build these bridges on closed, proprietary, colonizing infrastructure. We must resist digital colonialism. This requires what I call freedom architecture.

The current digital landscape often lacks openness. We are akin to drivers on the information superhighway of social media with no exit ramps. Platforms make it very difficult to move elsewhere with relationships, connections and communities.

We need protocols for freedom of movement. Think about how you keep your phone number when you change telecom carriers — that is number portability. We need the same for our digital lives.

Policy is catching up. Europe is leading the way. The Data Act gave us data portability; the Digital Markets Act promotes interoperability. This spirit enables you to exit a platform with your data and social graph. Because when

an exit is real, platforms must compete on care, not on capture. We need digital public infrastructure — the equivalent of public roads, bridges and parks, not private, walled gardens.

Where does this process of rejuvenation begin? It begins in the hallowed halls of places like the University of Zurich. Forging stronger democracies is not easy. We need to see the process as working out in a civic gym.

There is a temptation to delegate this work. Some policymakers suggest we should ask AI chatbots to debate policies for us. But this would be like sending robots to the gym to lift weights for us. They might be very impressive, but our own civic muscles — our capacity for attentiveness and deliberation — will atrophy. We cannot delegate democracy.

We need to envision the University of Zurich as a civic gym. It is here we train our civic muscles. It is here we research the tools for digital democracy and develop the ethical frameworks that guide our technology. We must move beyond the maximizing logic of the Max OS. We need an ethics of care.

This is relational alignment. We align with a process of care. The metric we should maximize is not engagement, but relational health, trust and inclusion. Institutions like the Right Livelihood Centre are vital because they ensure that innovation is aligned not with maximization, but with human flourishing.

Such a commitment to care and dialogue is where Switzerland's special position in the world can help us free the future — together. As a bastion of neutrality and consensus-driven governance, Switzerland can champion this vision of digital public infrastructure. It can help build and host the neutral digital spaces where global communities can deliberate on the pressing

challenges of our time — from AI safety to climate action — using the principles of broad listening we practice in Taiwan.

The superintelligence we are looking for is not a machine waiting to be invented in a lab. It is us — our augmented collective intelligence. It is our capacity to coordinate with care. We the people are the superintelligence.

In closing, I offer this poem, a prayer, a vision of our work together. When I became Taiwan's minister of digital affairs, I also became Taiwan's minister of shùwèi, which means digital and plural in Mandarin. A self-penned job description from that time remains my mantra to this day:

When we see Internet of Things, let's make it an Internet of Beings. When we see virtual reality, let's make it a shared reality.

When we see machine learning, let's make it collaborative learning. When we see user experience, let's make it about human experience.

And when we hear the singularity is near, let's always remember: the Plurality is here.

Thank you. Live long and ... prosper!