

SELECT SESSIONS FROM MLC MEETING

THE PROMISE AND PITFALLS OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: LAWMAKERS HEAR ABOUT FAST-MOVING CHANGES AHEAD

To begin to understand the far-reaching impacts of artificial intelligence on their states and provinces, Kevin Roose suggested to legislators that they start by getting a firsthand experience. Find one of the cutting-edge versions of AI, he said, and spend some time with it.

“Five hours [of direct contact] is about where the lights start to go on in people’s heads and they say, ‘OK, I get it now. I get why this is exciting or dangerous, or maybe both,’” Roose, author and technology columnist for *The New York Times*, said during a luncheon address in July at The Council of State Governments’ Midwest Legislative Conference Annual Meeting.

Speaking of AI’s progress, his worries and hopes about its development, its potential for good and bad outcomes, Roose mixed anecdotes and data to offer advice for wrapping one’s mind around what is still an opaque technology. “The progress [in AI] is unlike anything we’ve seen in technological history,” he said.

For example, in tests of how well they can answer questions, leading AI models improved from 25 percent right to 90 percent in just four years. (Human-level experts score about 89 percent.) In recent studies, AI bots have already scored in the 98th percentile on the bar exam for law school, out-diagnosed human doctors, had better ideas than MBA students at the Wharton School, and proved better than humans at divergent thinking (a measure of creativity) and emotional awareness.

“We’ve gone from having AIs that are pretty much dumber than anyone you know to AIs that are smarter than pretty much anyone you know, in the span of four years,” he said.

AI is getting more useful for everyday tasks while also powering scientific breakthroughs like discovering new Alzheimer’s or cancer drugs, finding 3-D structures of proteins, and providing more accurate forecasting of extreme weather events. And it’s improving lives in profound ways. Individuals with visual impairments can use a phone app that audibly describes the environment around them, enabling them to move about without a cane. AI is also already diagnosing diseases in people and plants, while students are using it for personal tutoring, with chatbots that guide them through problems without solving them.

Worries about the rise of AI, he said, include corporations racing to integrate it into their products without thought or testing, the displacement of white-collar workers (blue-collar jobs are not impacted as much), and humans, in general, “outsourcing our thinking.”

According to Roose, good technology should do five things: Make daily life better. Give people new powers. Be transparent and accountable. Share wealth. Inspire creativity and connection. By those measures, AI does well on some, not so well yet on others.

He suggested several ideas for policy leaders as they navigate the many changes coming from AI. First, assume today’s models will continue to improve, and find public-minded AI talent to help you make sense of it. Second, build social safety nets and community-based programs to help people who lose their jobs to AI. Third, cultivate the development of uniquely human skills.

“We need to be filling in the gaps in these systems, rather than compete with them in the areas that they are the strongest,” Roose said. Above all, he added, don’t be afraid.

“This stuff is complicated, but I don’t think we get places by being scared of what’s coming,” Roose said. “All we can do is try to use it to benefit ourselves, our families, our communities and our country. Because, after all, what is the point of technology? From my point of view, the point of technology is to do what my grandparents’ computer did for me in 1993: to connect me to a world that is bigger than my own, to give me new powers, to expand my horizons, to make the world more accessible to me and more navigable.”

“I hope this transition goes well. I think that if we do this well, it’s going to be one of the best things we ever do in the history of humanity.”

— Article written by Jon Davis (jdavis@csg.org), a policy analyst and communications specialist for CSG Midwest



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Technology columnist and author Kevin Roose at the MLC Annual Meeting

THOUGH OFTEN AT ODDS, LEGISLATORS AND JOURNALISTS SHARE A NEED TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH ONE ANOTHER

“Do you have a relationship with a journalist?”

Award-winning White House correspondent April Ryan asked that question of legislators in July during a session at the Midwest Legislative Conference Annual Meeting, and the answer may be more complicated today than ever before. In this age of smartphones and social media, she said, officeholders have ways of bypassing reporters altogether and trying to reach constituents directly. Add to that the divisiveness of today’s politics, and what some elected officials see as the media’s role in it, and the relationship-building gets even harder.

But Ryan said it’s worth making the effort: “When you talk, we listen. Don’t be afraid of us.”

Reporters only can get the story right if they have the background, the nuances and varying perspectives that come from open conversations with elected officials. Conversely, these relationships are a surer way for officials to get news, and their views, out to the public.

“Do you get fairly covered when you have that relationship? If not, you’ve got the wrong person,” said Ryan, who is currently the Washington, D.C., bureau chief for *TheGrio* and whose time in the White House press corps spans five presidents. “Who are you talking to? It’s like when you invite people to a party; you invite 100 people but about 30 to 50 show up. Cast a wide net, not just to the main newspaper and that’s it.”

It can pay personal and political dividends while also serving the public, a purpose that both journalists and legislators share.

“The bottom line is over the 27 years I’ve been in Washington — and I know in your respective districts — you serve because you want to effectuate change,” she said. “Everyone wants to fix things. We always say things are broken; but the question is, ‘How do I fix it?’” That’s where you are, that’s where journalists are. We’re watching you work to fix this nation.”

— Article written by Jon Davis (jdavis@csg.org), a policy analyst and communications specialist for CSG Midwest



“We’re watching you work to fix this nation.”

Journalist April Ryan at the MLC Annual Meeting

‘PEOPLE AGAINST THE BOSSES’: ENDURING LESSONS FROM WILLIAM MCKINLEY AND THE ELECTION OF 1896

Early in his talk, political strategist Karl Rove asked for a show of hands from the packed crowd of elected officials and others who had come to Ohio’s capital of Columbus for the Midwest Legislative Conference Annual Meeting. How many of you are happy with the state of American politics? he asked.

Few if any hands went up, but Rove, who throughout his July presentation displayed a seemingly encyclopedic knowledge of the politics and people of the Gilded Age, said we all can take solace by looking to the nation’s past — not for what was right, but what was wrong.

Political dysfunction is nothing new, and Rove argued that a rebirth inevitably comes when the American people demand a better politics and a leader comes along to deliver it. He cited Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan as 20th-century examples, but Rove spent most of his luncheon address making the case for a lesser-known president from the 1800s, the “mild-mannered Ohioan” William McKinley.

A hero of the Civil War, McKinley was kind and gentle, smart and reform-minded, and just what the country needed to get over the decades of political tumult coming out of that war, Rove said.

Hate, distrust and gridlock had been hallmarks of the Gilded Age period. Violence was used as a tool to disenfranchise Blacks. There was frequent chaos, even the wielding of a knife, on the floor of the U.S. House chamber over “disappearing quorums” and other endless partisan squabbles. And it was not uncommon for the majority party in Congress to “unseat” elected members of the minority party in order to pad its vote advantage.

Enter McKinley and the election of 1896. He ran on the slogan “The People Against the Bosses,” and McKinley proved to be a man of those words. Rather than seek the favor of the traditional presidential kingmakers, a select group of state and local party bosses, he went around them, traveling the country to build support. “He is the first presidential candidate in either party to appear before a Black audience and ask for their vote,” Rove said, noting McKinley’s stops in the Democratic stronghold South to make his pitch to Black and White Republicans alike.

McKinley faced a formidable foe in the general election, William Jennings Bryan. Together, Rove said, the two candidates admirably took on the biggest issue of the day, free silver vs. the gold standard in U.S. monetary policy, providing voters with a clear choice. But McKinley also offered something the country desperately needed. “He was a unifier,” Rove said.

Over the course of that 1896 election, 750,000 people came to the candidate’s “front porch” in Canton, Ohio. Among the most unlikely visitors: A group of Confederate veterans from the Civil War, invited by McKinley himself. Together, Confederate and Union veterans marched through the streets of Canton on the way to hear McKinley speak. “This has never been seen before; here are Blue and Gray united, as patriotic music is playing, flags are flying, and people are literally lining the streets and weeping openly,” Rove said.

“We will rise or fall together as a nation,” McKinley told the crowd that day. In an era as divided as the Gilded Age, that message was “incredibly powerful,” Rove said, with a lesson for political leaders that perhaps still resonates today.

— Article written by Tim Anderson (tanderson@csg.org), director of policy and research for CSG Midwest



Political strategist and historian Karl Rove at the MLC Annual Meeting