

Technology

Race for 'smart' hits fever pitch at electronics show

Artificial intelligence aiming to anticipate needs or desires



LAS VEGAS: This file photo taken on Jan 8, 2017 shows a robot developed by Taiwan engineers moving chess pieces on a board against an opponent at the 2017 Consumer Electronic Show (CES). —AFP photos



LAS VEGAS: This file photo taken on Jan 8, 2017 shows Armoto from HumaK, a next generation smart toy for children equipped with a mechanical switch, body sensor and AI speech engine offering a software and hardware platform, displayed at the 2017 Consumer Electronic Show (CES).

SAN FRANCISCO: Giving gadgets brains will be a hot theme at the Consumer Electronics Show set to open in Las Vegas, with device makers big and small touting hardware with "smarts." Whether it's a doorbell or refrigerator, a TV set or a toothbrush, chances are it will be connected to digital assistants powered by artificial intelligence aiming to anticipate needs or desires. "I think you're going to see the year of smart," said Jack Gold, a technology analyst with J Gold Associates.

One of the largest trade shows in the world, the January 9-12 CES will attract about 170,000 visitors and 3,900 exhibitors from 150 countries and will showcase innovations in computers, gaming, robotics, vehicle technology, virtual and augmented reality and more. Gold said gadgets will be increasingly tuned to glean insights about the people using them, with an aim of anticipating what might be desired at any given moment. "Your device will learn about you and will know your preferences, and it'll then try to get smarter about how to interact with you," he said.

Smart voice

As consumer electronics evolve, an overriding theme has become voice-assisted digital assistants being integrated into more devices, said Stephen Baker of the research firm NPD. "I think you are going to be overwhelmed by smart homes and voice-the voice speakers

yelling at you in the convention center and up and down the (Las Vegas) Strip will be overwhelming," Baker said of CES. He said gadget makers will infuse more products and services with virtual aides such as Amazon's Alexa, Google Assistant, Apple Siri and Microsoft Cortana.

"What happened is all the appliance and device guys gave up (on making their own isolated smart home systems) and instead are building an ecosystem in which pretty much everybody's devices will talk to Google or Amazon, or eventually Siri," Baker said. Still, says Gartner analyst Brian Blau, large and small tech firms are locked in battle to be at the heart of smart homes and devices.

"To some degree there is still a war on for the connected home platform," Blau said. "Communication standards are being worked out, but the other thing is whose allegiance you will commit your home to—will it be Samsung, LG, Amazon, Google?" Carolina Milanese of the consultancy Creative Strategies said major electronics firms like Bosch, Panasonic, Sony, Samsung are looking to showcase how several devices can work together with a con-

nected hub. "I definitely see the speaker still be key to controlling the connected home," she said.

Tesla wannabes

Bob O'Donnell, analyst and consultant with Technalysis Research, said artificial intelligence also opens the door to "computer vision" used in drones, autonomous cars and robotics which will be showcased at CES. Major carmakers will be on hand as well as makers of tech platforms for self-driving vehicles such as Intel's Mobileye and chipmaker Nvidia, along with a dozen exhibitors in the autonomous car "marketplace."

CES hosts the debut of a \$130,000 electric car from Fisker—a re-launched startup led by former BMW designed Henrik Fisker whose previous venture went bankrupt—and one of several challengers to rapidly expanding Tesla. Although CES ends just days ahead of a major Detroit auto show, O'Donnell said automakers are eager to show their new technology to a wider public. "It's a place to make a statement about technologies that

will have resonance," he said. "And the vast majority of the new innovations in cars are in fact tech things."

Empathy factor

O'Donnell said the success of these new technologies will depend on how well machines can think the way people do. "We are looking for ways these devices have contextual intelligence," he said. This would enable a device or assistant to understand multipart questions and develop responses which are adapted to the individual, O'Donnell said. "The whole idea of understanding context is a big theme in AI, and we'll see a lot of effort to improve the empathy of devices," he said.

O'Donnell said he expects to see "an evolution of the intelligence of those devices," adding that "AI is going to improve the experience of the device even if it doesn't change what they are." At this year's show, CES will include zones and marketplaces for sports technology, health and wellness, robotics, smart cities, product design and manufacturing and more, and conference panels on many of these topics. Keynote speakers include Ford Motor Co. chief executive Jim Hackett, Intel's Brian Krzanich and Huawei consumer chief Richard Yu. Conferences on tech policy will include US Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao, Federal Communications Commission chief Ajit Pai and Michigan Governor Rick Snyder. —AFP

“Your device will learn about you”

Indonesia launches cyber agency to tackle extremism

JAKARTA: Indonesia launched a new cyber security agency yesterday as the world's biggest Muslim majority country moves to tackle online religious extremism and a flood of fake news on social media. Millions of Indonesians are going online for the first time just as concern about Internet hoaxes reaches a fevered pitch. One of the most high-profile cases in recent times was a false claim circulating on social media in December that Beijing was seeking to wage biological warfare against Indonesia. The viral hoax prompted the Chinese embassy to issue a statement saying that the reports were "misleading".

Yesterday, Indonesian President Joko Widodo named Major General Djoko Setiadi, former chairman of the country's encryption agency, to lead the new body. Setiadi's Herculean task will include cracking down on terrorist networks which communicate online and combating online hate speech that has been blamed for driving fundamentalism in a country once praised for its religious pluralism.

"We will control cyberspace," Setiadi said yesterday. "Our technology will not only be able to detect, but also to penetrate [terrorist] networks." Chief Security Minister Wiranto, who like many Indonesians goes only by one name, added: "We need this body to help maintain security nationally, regionally and globally." Last week, Indonesia said it was adding some 600 more personnel to the ranks of its counter-terrorism police in a bid to crack down on Islamic State-inspired groups and other militants.

The archipelago nation has long struggled with Islamic militancy and attacks, including the 2002 Bali

How Facebook could stop a disease outbreak

PARIS: Facebook accounts and telephone records can be used to pinpoint the best individuals to vaccinate to stop a disease outbreak in its tracks, researchers said yesterday. Such people would be "central" in their social networks, and thus likelier to spread disease-causing germs from one group to another.

Assuming there is an outbreak, and not enough vaccines for every person in the world, immunizing these well-connected indi-

viduals would remove social "bridges" by which germs can spread, experts wrote in the *Journal of the Royal Society Interface*. The study, which tracked the digital and physical contacts of more than 500 university students, concluded that people who are central in their digital networks are also central in their real-life human networks.

"If you are a hub for your friends in the sense that you have many contacts via phone calls or on Facebook, making you a bridge between diverse communities, chances are high that you are also likely to be a bridge to connect those communities in case of an epidemic, such as influenza," study co-author Enys Mones of the Technical University of Denmark said. —AFP

Spotify hit with new copyright suit in US

NEW YORK: A music publisher is seeking at least \$1.6 billion from Spotify for alleged copyright violations, the latest lawsuit to hit the fast-growing streaming company. Wixen Music Publishing, Inc.—which holds rights to songs of major artists including Neil Young, The Doors, Tom Petty and Santana—charged in a lawsuit that Spotify failed to seek licenses for significant parts of its 30 million-song catalog.

"While Spotify has become a multibillion dollar company, songwriters and their publishers, such as Wixen, have not been able to fairly and rightfully share in Spotify's success, as Spotify has in many cases used their music without a license and without compensation," said the lawsuit filed last week in a federal court in Los Angeles. The lawsuit said that Spotify initially tried to work with record labels but, "in a race to be first to market, made insufficient efforts to collect the required musical composition information."

Wixen, which is seeking a jury trial against the Swedish company, presented a list of 10,784 songs for which it questioned Spotify's permission to stream. —AFP

More than half of Norway car sales now electric

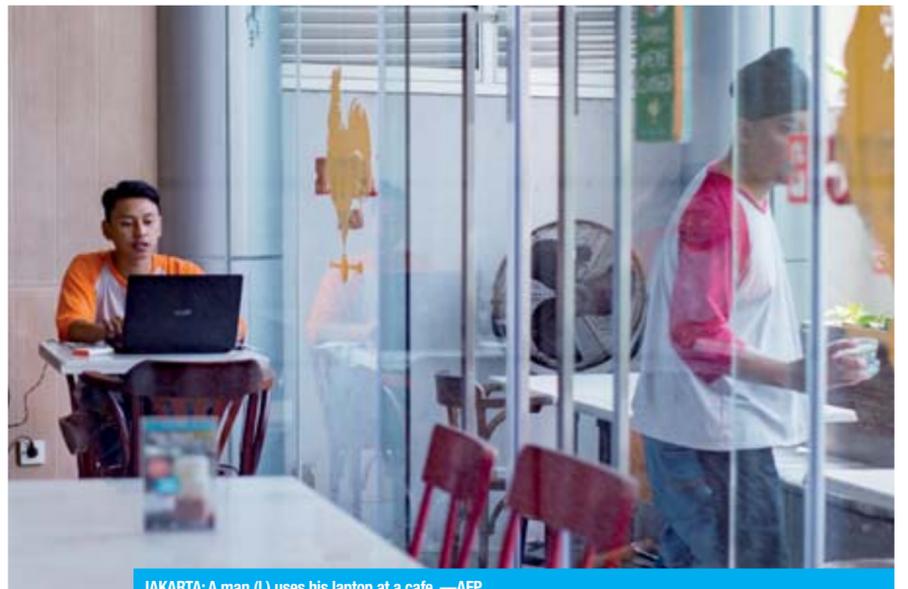
OSLO: Sales of electric and hybrid cars exceeded half of new registrations in Norway in 2017, a record aided by generous subsidies that extended the Nordic nation's lead in a shift from fossil-fuel engines, data showed yesterday. Pure electric cars and hybrids, which have both battery power and a diesel or petrol motor, accounted for 52 percent of all new car sales in 2017 in Norway against 40 percent in 2016, the independent Norwegian Road Federation (OFV) said. "No one else is close" in terms of a national share of electric cars, OFV chief Oeyvind Solberg Thorsen said. "For the first time we have a fossil fuel market share below 50 percent."

Norway exempts new electric cars from many taxes and road tolls and owners often get free parking and charging. Norway also generates almost all its electricity from hydropower, so the shift helps to reduce air pollution and climate change. Last year, the International Energy Agency (IEA) said Norway was far ahead of other nations such as the Netherlands, Sweden, China, France and Britain in electric car sales.

By the IEA yardstick, which excludes hybrid cars which only have a small electric motor that cannot be plugged in, electric car sales in Norway rose to 39 percent in 2017 from 29 in 2016, when the Netherlands was in second on 6.4 percent. "The shift has gone faster than we'd thought, and the big car makers say they're going all in to produce non-fossil cars," Thorsen told Reuters. Norway's electric car policies contrast with its big offshore oil and gas production.

Christina Bu, head of the Norwegian Electric Vehicle Association which represents owners, said it was too early to reduce incentives for electric cars, noting that parliament has set a goal of phasing out sales of fossil fuel vehicles by 2025. "It's an ambitious goal only seven years away," she told Reuters. A plan last year by the right-wing government to trim electric car incentives in the nation of 5.3 million people, dubbed a "Tesla Tax", was dropped in negotiations on the 2018 budget.

Norwegian car sales in 2017 were topped by the Volkswagen Golf, BMWi3, Toyota Rav4 and Tesla Model X. The Tesla is pure electric and others have electric or hybrid versions. Overall, sales of pure electric cars in Norway rose in 2017 to 21 percent from 16 in 2016. Sales of diesel cars fell most in 2017, to 23 percent from 31 in 2016. Some regions in Norway have started to charge higher road tolls for diesel cars than for petrol-driven vehicles. —Reuters



JAKARTA: A man (L) uses his laptop at a cafe. —AFP

bombings that killed 202 people, mostly foreign tourists, in the country's worst-ever terror attack. A sustained crackdown weakened the most dangerous networks but the emergence of IS has proved a potent new rallying cry for radicals. Hundreds of Indonesian radicals flocked to fight with IS, sparking fears that weakened extremist outfits could get a new lease of life.

Meanwhile, more than 150 million out of 255 million Indonesians are now estimated to be Internet users. The

explosion in the number of Internet users comes amid global concern about the spread of fake news, with some critics claiming a flood of false stories circulating online may have helped Donald Trump win the US presidential election. Still, some worry that Indonesia's new cyber agency could threaten privacy rights. "It would be really unfortunate if it was going to be used to monitor public discussions because that is people's right," said Internet privacy expert Nukman Luthfie. —AFP