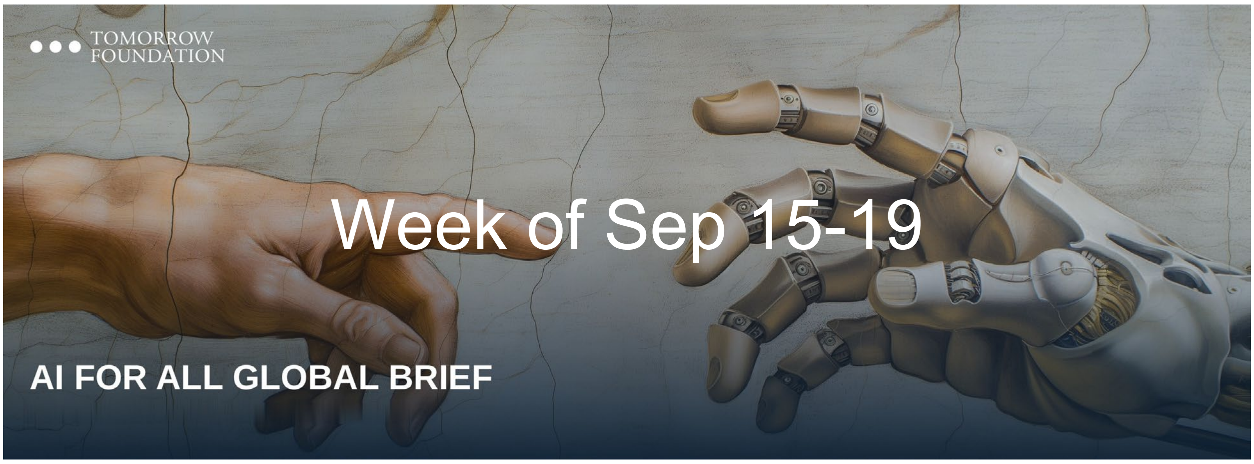

1. GLOBAL SIGNALS — LABOR, GOVERNANCE & SOCIETY

The Gulf Isn't Choosing a Bloc. It's Building Both.

Saudi Arabia is simultaneously deploying American chips at scale — AWS alone has committed $5.3 billion — and building Arabic-language AI on a Chinese MiniMax foundation through state-backed HUMAIN. That isn't indecision. It's the clearest evidence yet that middle-power “sovereign AI” means strategic hedging, not alignment with either Washington or Beijing. American export restrictions push Riyadh toward Chinese alternatives when convenient; Chinese shortfalls in frontier performance push it back toward American infrastructure when that's what the workload needs. The Gulf's real leverage isn't in developing competing frontier models — it's in controlling the physical layer everyone else needs: data centers, electricity, land.

> **Why it matters:** Sovereign AI strategy is increasingly about infrastructure leverage, not technological independence — and Gulf states are writing the playbook that other middle powers, including several across Africa and Southeast Asia, are watching closely.

Source: Semafor

ALSO THIS WEEK

- AI layoffs just broke a five-month streak as the leading monthly cause of US job cuts, falling to fourth place in August at 3,462 — but AI still accounts for 22% of all 2026 job cuts to date, the leading reason for the year overall. [source]
- UN AI accountability frameworks are gaining traction at the multilateral level: the first Global Dialogue on AI Governance convened in Geneva this July, with UN human rights chief Volker Türk pressing for enforceable safety standards and algorithmic transparency ahead of a second summit planned for May 2027 in New York. [source]

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2. INFRASTRUCTURE & COMPUTE

Southeast Asia Is Building Gigawatts of AI Capacity — Not Necessarily an AI Economy

The Asia-Pacific's data center development pipeline hit a record 26.5 gigawatts in the first half of 2026, with Southeast Asia accounting for roughly half of all capacity currently under construction. Malaysia leads the region at 1,039 megawatts, Thailand follows at 859 megawatts. On paper, this is an infrastructure boom. In practice, it is also a test: a regional division of labor is already hardening, with Singapore concentrating on high-value activity while its neighbors absorb the lower-margin, high-footprint buildout. Whether that investment comes with skills pipelines, local supplier development, and research partnerships will determine whether these countries become genuine participants in the AI economy or, as one analysis put it, someone else's server farm.

Why it matters: The Global South's core AI-infrastructure bargain is visible here in miniature. Physical hosting and economic participation are not the same thing, and the window to negotiate the difference is open now, not after the concrete is poured.

Source: The Diplomat | Cushman & Wakefield, APAC H1 2026

ALSO THIS WEEK

- Egypt picks a side: Cairo commits to a $1 billion, 200-megawatt AI data center via a Western consortium (Vodafone Business, Elsewedy Electric, Cassava Technologies), days after Xi Jinping's first visit to Egypt in a decade — one of the clearest African examples yet of AI infrastructure used as geopolitical leverage. [source]

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3. EDUCATION & HUMAN CAPACITY

Students Have Already Decided About AI. Institutions Are Still Debating It.

More than half of US college students now use AI weekly in coursework, with one in five using it daily — while 53% of their institutions still discourage or prohibit it outright. The gap between what students are already doing and what campuses have formally sanctioned isn't closing; it's just going undocumented. Latin America shows what happens when institutions stop fighting that gap: a regional survey finds 92% of students and 79% of faculty actively engaging with AI, markedly ahead of the caution still dominating US and European policy debates.

Why it matters: A policy vacuum doesn't stop AI use — it just means the terms of that use go unset by anyone accountable to students, and the institutions moving fastest to engage rather than restrict are the ones shaping what comes next.

Source: Gallup / Lumina Foundation | Digital Education Council, LATAM Survey 2026

Confidence note: Gallup fieldwork was conducted in October 2025 and published April 2026 — presented as structural context, not breaking news.

ALSO THIS WEEK

- AU InnoFest'26, the African Union's flagship youth innovation convening, takes place September 29-30 in Addis Ababa. No verified call-for-proposals deadline was confirmed in time for this issue. [source]

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4. CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

UMG and ElevenLabs Say Their New AI Platform Puts Artists at the Center. The Contract Terms Aren't Public Yet.

Universal Music Group and ElevenLabs announced a multi-year partnership to build a dedicated AI music platform — remixes, mashups, personalized vocal experiences — distinct from ElevenLabs' existing tools. UMG chief Lucian Grainge framed it as putting “artists, songwriters, and fans at the center,” and ElevenLabs' CEO promised fair compensation. Neither company has published revenue-share terms, consent mechanisms, or how “fair” gets defined. That gap matters more than the announcement: it arrives months after 29 global artist and songwriter organizations publicly warned that AI licensing deals were being struck over artists' heads, with consent requested for voice use but not for the underlying compositions being ingested. UMG's own artists are the ones this new platform will run on.

Why it matters: “Artist-centered” is doing a lot of work in this announcement without a contract to back it up — and the labels writing the check are the same ones artist coalitions have already accused of signing away rights their artists never agreed to.

Source: Digital Music News

Confidence note: Deal terms are genuinely undisclosed as of publication, not a sourcing gap on our end.

ALSO THIS WEEK

- Entertainment Week Africa 2026 (Lagos, November 17-22) launches its first dedicated AI & Tech track alongside a new “Capital Desk” connecting creative-tech founders to investors — last year's comparable Deal Room drew 178 applications and nine accelerator placements. [source]

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5. REGIONAL LENS — AFRICA & THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Africa's Grids Can't Yet Carry the AI Boom They're Being Asked to Host

Combined installed data center capacity across Africa's five leading AI markets — Egypt, Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria, and South Africa — currently sits below 500 megawatts, less than France deployed in 2024 alone. Demand in those same markets is projected to grow 3.5 to 5.5 times by the end of the decade. Kenya's stalled $1 billion Microsoft-G42 Olkaria campus remains the sharpest illustration: officials concluded the facility alone would draw roughly a third of the country's entire installed grid capacity. Nigeria, Egypt, and Kenya have each released draft AI policies naming dependence on foreign tech companies as a security concern — but no policy document changes the megawatt count.

> **Why it matters:** Power, not capital or policy ambition, is now the hard ceiling on African AI sovereignty — and the households and industries competing for the same scarce megawatts will bear the cost of getting the tradeoff wrong.

Source: World Economic Forum | Rest of World

Confidence note: The WEF analysis carries a September 7 republication date but was originally published July 23, 2026; Kenya stall details are drawn from May 2026 reporting. Treated as ongoing analytical context, not breaking news.

ALSO THIS WEEK

- South Africa bets on a university-led compute cluster: UCT's African Compute Initiative routes sovereign compute through a research institution rather than a state-telecom or foreign hyperscaler. [source]
- The same grid backlash is now federal in the United States: Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez introduced a moratorium bill on new AI data center construction pending environmental and cost-to-consumers legislation. [source]

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6. OPPORTUNITIES & EVENTS

The World Bank's AI Summit Wants Solutions Built for No Signal, Not Silicon Valley

The World Bank and South Korea's government are convening policymakers, researchers, and youth innovators in Seoul, October 19-22, around a specific bet: that the next wave of useful AI won't come from frontier labs but from tools built for the 1.2 billion young people entering the workforce in developing countries over the next decade. The summit's Small AI Hackathon Challenge is the concrete entry point — open to innovators aged 18-35 from any World Bank member country, built explicitly around constrained environments: limited connectivity, limited power, limited infrastructure, the conditions most of the world actually builds in. Most summit sessions are invitation-only, but selected sessions stream publicly, and the hackathon itself is the real access point for practitioners rather than institutions.

> **Why it matters:** This is one of the few near-term convenings this Brief has tracked that puts a concrete, open call in front of young builders in the Global South rather than just discussing them.

Source: World Bank, Global AI and Digital Summit 2026

ALSO THIS WEEK

- GITEX Global (Dubai) runs December 7-11, 2026 — the region's largest AI infrastructure, investment, and policy gathering. [source]
- AU InnoFest'26 (Addis Ababa, September 29-30) is the African Union's flagship youth innovation convening — full details in the Education section.

ONE SIGNAL WE ARE WATCHING

Physical infrastructure — power, land, chips — is turning out to be the real site of leverage this week, not policy or technology. The Gulf isn't picking a side between American and Chinese AI stacks; it's building both at once, because control of the data centers themselves matters more than which flag flies over the model inside them. Southeast Asia is hosting a record share of the world's new compute without capturing much of the economic value, because nobody negotiated the terms before the concrete was poured. Africa's own AI ambitions are hitting the same wall from the other direction: the grid, not the strategy documents, is what decides which projects actually get built. Three regions, three different postures toward the same fact — whoever controls the physical layer sets the terms, and everyone else is negotiating from what's left.

AI for All Global Brief is a publication of Tomorrow Foundation.