Stanford Codex 2026 Award Remarks

Daniel E. Ho
Stanford University

Dear Harry, Roland, and the CodeX Community,

Thank you so much for this honor. To receive this from a community I admire so much makes it all the more meaningful.

Harry asked me to make a few remarks, so I wanted to start off with a confession. I feel somewhat like an interloper. I didn't come to this work thinking that I would be doing work on *computational law*. My work has been fundamentally motivated by the failures of the legal system, and particularly those of administrative injustice, when ordinary citizens engage with government: by filing for a tax refund, an unemployment check, asylum, or veterans benefits. These characterize the vast majority of interactions between citizens and the state, and when government cannot get that interaction right, it is how public trust is lost.

There is an unending amount of work that documents what ails these systems, but I really wanted to develop, assess, and field interventions to improve this state of affairs. And that is what inevitably led me to the intersection of law and technology.

Let me offer three reflections to that effect.

First, computational law – broadly defined – has so much to offer to the legal system because it necessarily sits at that intersection. In Michigan, some 40,000 residents were falsely accused of fraud because of the improper translation of legal obligations into computable systems, with a 93 percent error rate. So much can go astray when we don't get that translation right.

I'm reminded of the story of Justice Breyer delivering a lecture at a conference for Chinese officials over 20 years ago at Yale Law School. The conference was simultaneously translated and Justice Breyer was making a central point of the role of the Supreme Court in a federal system. He said something to the effect of: "The Supreme Court doesn't make most of family law. Hartford does. The Supreme Court doesn't make most of criminal law. Hartford does. The Supreme Court doesn't make most of property law. Hartford does."

All of the Chinese officials were dutifully nodding along. But Hartford, when simultaneously translated, sounds strikingly like 'Harvard' in Mandarin. Here was a sitting justice of the US Supreme Court lecturing Chinese officials who understood him to be saying, at the Yale Law School, that he didn't make most of the law; Harvard did.

Many of the failures of government software come from these types of misunderstandings that can only be addressed by genuine exchange.

Second, none of these are technical problems alone. In one collaboration with a federal agency, where we were building a simple form of AI assistance for a multibillion dollar adjudication program, one of our researchers noticed that a button on the user interface had erroneous text. We pointed this out to a team of contractors working on the system, and their response: "We'll have to see whether fixing that is within our work order and, if so, schedule it as a task item to fix in around six weeks." Something that would take a Stanford undergraduate 5 minutes to fix – under a minute with AI tooling – was estimated to take six weeks. That is not a problem of technology, but it is a problem of the procurement process, the dearth of technical talent within government, and the shadow of legacy technology that leads so many agencies to still rely on COBOL mainframe systems. It shouldn't be that way, but fixing these are not just software fixes. We need to ask who is empowered? By what rules? And do these rules still make sense? These are precisely the kinds of questions that computational law — at its best — forces us to confront.

Third, to address these translation problems requires interdisciplinary work that has shaped so much of the field of computational law. Whether to treat the problem of tax evasion as a classification problem or a regression problem for the IRS, for instance, might seem just like a technical problem, but it has massive consequences for vertical equity and the normative considerations of how we audit fairly. IRS will spend much more time auditing lower income individuals if it focuses just on whether there was any underreporting of income, and much more time on higher income individuals if it matters that underreporting was in the millions. As these systems migrate to high risk domains, teams with insights from social science, philosophy, and law matter as much to ensuring the responsible design and the navigation of hidden value choices.

In all of this work, I have been deeply grateful to an incredible team of collaborators, students, postdocs, and government partners who have worked to envision a future of responsible integration of technology that can improve the law.

The work of computational law is, at its heart, the work of translation — between legal obligation and code, between technical possibility and human dignity, between the law

as it is and the law as it ought to be. I am grateful to be part of a community that takes all three seriously, and I can't wait to see what we build together.