What is AI?

As artificial intelligence has become both increasingly sophisticated and common, questions about its capabilities, benefits, and risks have become inescapable.

Today, 52% of Americans are more concerned than excited about the increased use of artificial intelligence, and debates over the proper use of AI have monopolized conversations around the tech industry.[1]

Much of the apprehension about AI stems from the uncertainty surrounding its future. Education can empower lawmakers and citizens to use this technology in ways that benefit their communities and offer promise rather than peril. An understanding of what AI is and how existing laws can protect its users is essential.

AI Past: An Old Technology with New Developments

Artificial Intelligence is a broad term and notoriously hard to describe because of the continuously changing nature of the technology. One of the most widely read textbooks on AI argues that AI should be used as a category for a machine's uses and actions, not its design and nature. An AI system can meet goals using intelligence acquired through data it receives, "Artificial Intelligence," then, can apply to a variety of functions from problem solving to speech recognition.

Interest in AI has surged over the last year, largely due to OpenAI's Chat GPT, which introduced people to a new way of engaging with computers and brought the concept of artificial intelligence to the attention of the mainstream. Amidst buzzy headlines and warnings of a tech apocalypse, it is easy to forget that the story of AI

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1 "Growing Public Concern About the Role of Artificial Intelligence in Daily Life." Pew Research Center, 28 Aug. 2023, www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/08/28/growing-public-concern-about-the-role-of-artificial-intelligence-in-daily-life/.

does not begin in 2023. Rather, Artificial Intelligence is a technology that has been theorized, attempted, and refined for years-machine learning dates back nearly a century. In the 1930s, mathematician Alan Turing queried, "can machines think?", in 1997, Deep Blue, a computer, beat the reigning world chess champion at his own game, and in 2011 a natural language computer won Jeopardy![1] While the amount of data and speed of response AI has access to has increased exponentially, it has been a decades long process rather than an overnight miracle.

It is crucial to remember the rich history of AI when confronted with the hyperbolic language warning of a new technology far beyond our control and understanding.

AI Present: An Increasingly Accessible Commodity

Over the last decade, AI's presence in our everyday lives has greatly increased. Search engine suggestions, digital voice assistants like Apple's Siri and Amazon's Alexa, and language processing tools like ChatGPT are all examples of AI that is accessible to the average person.

The barrier of entry for AI has decreased significantly, and both the building and use of the technology have been democratized. Consequently, the profound potential of AI is greater than ever. Industries from finance to medicine and everything in between stand to benefit from artificial intelligence.

In September of this year, Mary Bird Perkins Cancer Center, located in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, became the first clinical site to introduce cutting-edge Artificial Intelligence software that streamlines the scanning process. New AI platforms promise to help teachers by providing instant feedback on students' papers, as a writing tutor that turns errors into opportunities for student learning. Those in the financial industry are looking towards AI as a way to add transparency to the loaning process—with a clear framework for assessing borrowers as opposed to the often-opaque face-to-face approach.

AI Future: A World of Potential, If Approached Correctly

While the human brain is incredibly complex and versatile, AI can certainly help it. A basic understanding of what AI is and how it works is the first step to using the technology to enhance the lives and livelihoods of those who use it.

While much remains unknown about AI, and its risks should not be ignored, taking advantage of the frameworks available will allow us to explore its potential with informed confidence.

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1 Gil Press. "A Very Short History of Artificial Intelligence (AI)." Forbes, 30 Dec. 2016, www.forbes.com/sites/gilpress/2016/12/30/a-very-short-history-of-artificial-intelligence-ai/?sh=288bac0c6fba.