COLUMN: TOPICS, TECH, AND TRENDS

How Long Have You Been Using Artificial Intelligence? The History of AI

Author: Lane Wesson

This installment marks the first of a three-part series exploring the evolution of artificial intelligence, the ethics surrounding its use, and its potential to enhance student learning. Look for the next feature in the NCMLE Journal, where we will dive deeper into the ethical considerations of AI.

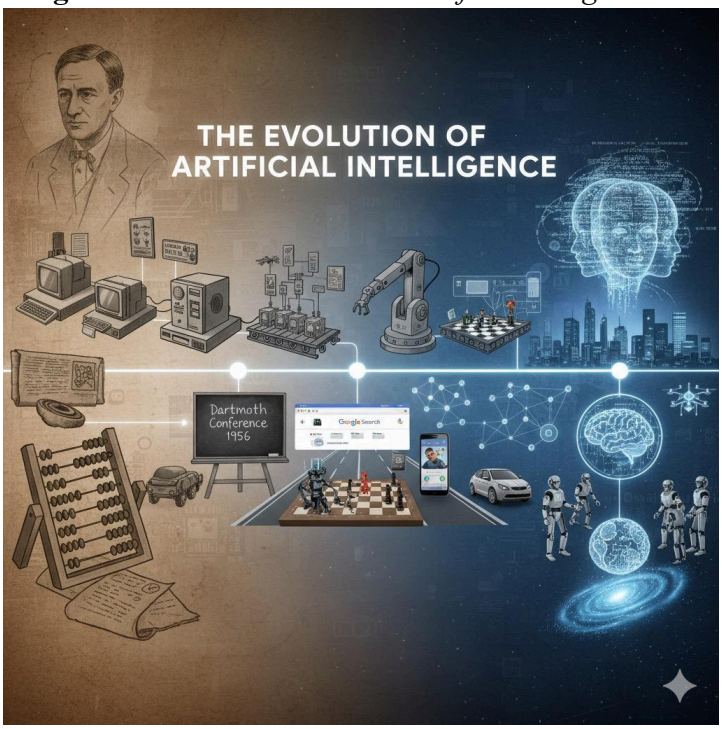
Have you ever wondered how your phone knew when you were driving near a certain grocery store or restaurant? How does Netflix know exactly the type of movies/shows that you like to watch? Or how Amazon identifies and makes suggestions for you that are actually pretty relevant? Do you remember life before having a map on your cell phone that tells you how to get from point A to point B? What seems like a magical world of Artificial Intelligence (AI), isn't really magic at all. It is the culmination of many historical events dating back to the mid 1950s. Let's take a walk through decades of ambition, innovation, and a few major setbacks to learn how we got to where we are today; surrounded by AI.

In order for us to open our minds to the world of AI, I think it is imperative that we first take a look back at a sampling of revolutionary products that were labeled as bad ideas. In the 1920s the world famous silent film star, Sir Charlie Chaplin, incorrectly predicted the failure of the "talkies" (movies with sound) when he told a reporter that he would "give the talkies three years, that's all" until audiences would become disillusioned with the spectacle (Brody, 2014). Joseph Schenk, President of United Artists (now MGM), boldly stated "talking doesn't belong in pictures" arguing that he felt that dialogue was overrated (The New York Times, 1928). On February 26, 1995, Newsweek published an article titled "Why the web won't be Nirvana". In the article, the author wrote that teenagers were using it less than adults and the opportunities for online shopping were very limited stating that the "local mall does more business in an afternoon than the entire Internet handles in a month" (Stoll, 1995). Tell that to Amazon! Lastly, in 2007, then CEO of Microsoft, Steve Ballmer, said "there is no chance that the iPhone is going to get any significant market share" (Yarow, 2012). Today, the iPhone holds 61% of US market share and many of us carry one with us everywhere we go. So, as you see, innovation isn't always accepted with open arms; however, that doesn't mean it can't be useful in society (StatCounter Global Stats, 2026).

The visual in Image 1 shows the cumulative timeline of AI beginning with what is considered to be the birth of AI in the 1950s. In 1950, the British mathematician Alan Turing published a paper proposing the Turing Test which would be a way to gauge a machine's ability to exhibit intelligent behavior equivalent to that of a human (Turing, 1950). The test consists of a human interrogator chatting electronically with both another human and

a machine. The interrogator then tries to determine which one is human. This was the first mention of human-like intelligence in machines and the first test developed to detect it.

Image 1 *Generated with assistance from Google Gemini*



AI wasn't a named field until the Dartmouth Workshop in 1956. This was the establishment of AI research when four scientists met in the summer of 1956 at the Dartmouth Summer Research Project led by mathematics professor John McCarthy. There, they keyed the term Artificial Intelligence. While no major discoveries happened during the workshop, it is celebrated for bringing together the founders of the field of AI and setting ambitious goals for the technology moving forward. McCarthy was considered to be the organizer of the workshop and originator of the term artificial intelligence. Marvin Minsky was a co-organizer and went on to win the Turing Award. Methaniel Rochester was co-organizer and went on to become the designer of IBM's first computer. Claude Shannon was also considered a co-organizer and became the founder of information theory. The Dartmouth Workshop served as a catalyst for future research by creating the defined field of study, inspiring the development of early AI programming languages, and spurring the establishment of major AI research labs at universities like MIT, Stanford, and Carnegie Mellon (SK hynix Newsroom, 2025).

Pause: I just got a notification that there is a sale on tech at my local Walmart! No, the pause really is due to what is coined as the first AI Winter. This inadvertent pause in AI development was primarily due to limited computing power, theoretical challenges, and a cut in funding from the mid 1974 to 1980 (History of Data Science, 2021). With those road blocks came less interest and excitement in the field of AI. After a brief revival of interest in the early 1980s driven by the development of expert systems used in the medical, business, and

scientific fields, the second AI Winter fell upon us from the mid 1980s to the early 1990s (History of Data Science, 2021). During this time the fields that were primarily using expert systems found those to be highly expensive to maintain and less dependable than desired. Hardware limitations and funding reductions also caused lower usage of and interest in AI (Carvão, 2025).

After the second AI winter, the industry recovered and developments focussed on practical applications and machine learning algorithms that were capable of learning from data. This period from the 1990s to around 2010 is often called the age of machine learning, and is marked by exponential growth in processing by companies such as IBM and Apple. In 1997 IBM's Deep Blue supercomputer defeated the reigning world chess champion which was a major milestone in AI's capabilities. The development of these powerful computers and graphic processing units (GPUs) rocketed computer power leading to even more advancements in AI. At this time, AI was used regularly in fields like healthcare, finance, manufacturing, and transportation. Remember that supercomputer made by IBM? In 2011 IBMs AI named "Watson" flexed its non-existent brain by competing with and defeating human champions on Jeopardy (Kulp, 2023). This was just the beginning of our understanding of the power of natural language processing (ie. AI).

Beginning in the 2010s, came the deep learning revolution. Now, if you're old like me, you can probably remember a time when AI wasn't embedded into our daily lives. If I was traveling somewhere I went to Mapquest, typed in where I was leaving from and where I was going; then, printed those directions and took them with me. Remember that? Now we just tell Siri to map us to where we want to go or open the navigation application of choice on our smartphone and it tells us exactly where to turn to get to our location. Believe it or not, maps weren't part of smartphone technology until around 2010 with widespread adoption from 2010 to 2015 (Gibbs, 2015). Between that time we had the GPS navigation that we had to hope didn't fall off of our dash as we were taking a turn. Then came the Tesla! Self-driving cars became a reality with AI powered cars that felt like something out of the next century.

However, none of the various forms of AI really amazed yet also terrified us as much as generative AI. These models such as Google Gemini, ChatGPT, DALL-E, and Microsoft CoPilot are capable of creating new and original content. These models can write lesson plans, create recipes, and analyze data all in about 60 seconds. Now that is scary! I am of the mindset though, that if taught properly and used ethically, these forms of generative AI can be life changing. I will discuss the various ways generative AI can be used in the next article in this series.

The history of Artificial Intelligence is less a steady march of progress and more a chaotic, funding-dependent rollercoaster. It all kicked off with the optimistic founders of the Dartmouth Workshop in 1956, where scientists basically gave a computer a very hard homework assignment. Then came the infamous AI Winters, periods of intellectual frost where government and corporate funding evaporated faster than a spilled cup of coffee in a server room. But we kept plugging away, leading to glorious moments like a computer finally beating a human chess champion, proving machines are great at board games, and then the arrival of Deep Learning. Now, with generative models crafting entire essays and Siri still trying to figure out what song you're humming, the next chapter of AI won't just be about building smarter technology, but about

responsibly shaping the future, and hopefully, not letting the machines critique our fashion choices while they do it.

References

Brody, R. (2014, January 3). Charlie Chaplin's talking pictures. The New Yorker. https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/charlie-chaplins-talking-pictures

Carvão, P. (2025, August 24). Are we headed into another AI winter? Forbes. https://www.forbes.com/sites/paulocarvao/2025/08/24/are-we-heading-into-another-ai-winter/

Gibbs, S. (2015, February 8). Google Maps: A decade of transforming the mapping landscape. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/feb/08/google-maps-10-anniversary-iphone-android-street-view

History of Data Science. (2021, September 1). AI winter: The highs and lows of artificial intelligence. https://www.historyofdatascience.com/ai-winter-the-highs-and-lows-of-artificial-intelligence/

Kulp, P. (2023, May 12). IBM Watson's origin story. Tech Brew. https://www.techbrew.com/stories/2023/05/12/ibm-watson-history-generative-ai

SK hynix Newsroom. (2025, January 10). All about AI: The origins, evolution and future of AI. https://news.skhynix.com/all-about-ai-the-origins-evolution-future-of-ai/

StatCounter Global Stats. (2026). Mobile vendor market share United States of America. https://gs.statcounter.com/vendor-market-share/mobile/united-states-of-america

Stoll, C. (1995, February 26). Why the web won't be nirvana. Newsweek. https://www.newsweek.com/clifford-stoll-why-web-wont-be-nirvana-185306

The New York Times. (1928, August 22). "Talkies" just a fad, says Joseph Schenck; producer thinks they will lose popularity. https://www.nytimes.com/1928/08/22/archives/talkies-just-a-fad-says-joseph-schenck-producer-thinks-they-will.html

Turing, A. (1950). Computing machinery and intelligence. Mind A Quarterly Review of Psychology and Philosophy, 236, 433–460. https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/lix.236.433

Yarow, J. (2012, June 29). Here's what Steve Ballmer thought about the iPhone five years ago. Business Insider. https://www.businessinsider.com/heres-what-steve-ballmer-thought-about-the-iphone-five-years-ago-2012-6

Dr. Lane Wesson (wessonrl@winthrop.edu) is in her 30th year in education with specialties in Literacy, Classroom Management, Curriculum and Instruction, methods, edTPA, and AI for teachers. She has developed a national professional development program showing classroom teachers how to use AI appropriately in their planning, instruction, and assessment.