How Americans see AI: Caution, skepticism, and hope

Communication, understanding, and impact in the age of AI

AI Literacy Lab
Northeastern University

I n the year since the release of ChatGPT, the volume of news and information about artificial intelligence has skyrocketed. AI dominates headlines in traditional media and fills social media chatter. It's the subject of podcasts and TikToks and YouTube videos, highlighting deep dangers and broad promises. What are people taking away from these stories, and how does that connect with reality?

The **AI Literacy Lab at Northeastern University** was launched to advance the public's understanding of artificial intelligence. Our goal is to help people transcend the hype, exuberance, and fear and embark on meaningful discussions about how to manage this new technology and integrate it into society. To encourage responsible conversations about AI in the future, we need to understand the state of the conversation right now.

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In August 2023, we conducted a poll of 1,000 Americans 18 and older to gauge their feelings and attitudes about AI. We found that AI has caught the public's attention – more than three quarters of Americans consume news about it on a weekly basis – and created a deep sense of caution and skepticism. Our survey also pinpointed some demographic factors that inform people's attitudes toward AI. People with a STEM background are more likely to feel optimistic about the technology, suggesting that more technical knowledge could diminish anxiety and prompt more nuanced discussions. Women are more likely than men to be skeptical of AI and its stewards, raising questions about whether some uses of AI seem disproportionately harmful to children, families, and women themselves.

The results of this survey suggest many avenues of training, collaboration, and further study. For the media and technologists, the path forward is clear: Better understanding means better stewardship.

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Key findings

Our survey found that Americans are broadly concerned about the development of AI and the role it will have in life, work, and politics.

77%

consume news about AI on at least a weekly basis

People are paying attention to news about AI. 76.9% of Americans consume news about AI at least once a week, and 27.1% consume it daily. Respondents reported getting their news from a range of sources, from newspapers and TV to social media sites.

55%

don't feel confident that AI will be developed responsibly

A majority of Americans somewhat or strongly disagree with the statement, "technology companies are designing AI responsibly." When asked if AI is being built with protections for unintended consequences, 37% disagree, 34.2% agree, and 28.3% aren't sure.

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64%

say the government should regulate AI

As policymakers debate the future of AI development, nearly two-thirds of Americans say they favor regulation of AI. And 57.4% of Americans think development should stop until a global ethical framework is in place.

52%

say they can't distinguish between human- and AI-generated text or images

Asked if they feel confident that they can tell the difference between text or images created by humans and text or images created by AI, more than half of Americans said no – a sign of AI's advancement, and also of vulnerability.

83%

worry about AI-driven misinformation during the presidential campaign

As deepfakes and other forms of misinformation proliferate on social media, a large majority of Americans say they're concerned that AI could be used to spread misinformation during the 2024 presidential campaign.

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68%

say they haven't used a large language model such as ChatGPT

Despite broad attention to generative AI, more than two-thirds of Americans haven't used a public-facing text generating program such as ChatGPT, and 85% haven't used an image generating program such as Midjourney.

52%

think it's possible that AI will take away their jobs

Long before the generative AI boom, there have been warnings that AI could displace human workers. Now, about half of Americans say they somewhat or strongly agree that AI could eliminate their own jobs.

70%

think AI could take away jobs in the arts

One field that seems especially vulnerable to disruption from AI is the arts. One example of an AI use case: 70% of Americans say it's reasonable to use AI to illustrate the cover of a magazine.

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Gaps in trust

The public has little confidence in the ethics of the companies creating AI

Developments in AI are rolling out at a rapid pace, with tech companies rushing to integrate generative AI into their products. The American public has doubts about whether these companies are providing responsible stewardship of this powerful new technology. Among the findings in our survey:

55%

aren't confident that AI will be developed responsibly

46%

don't believe the people designing AI are concerned about ethics

56%

don't think private companies should be left to themselves to determine standards for AI

57%

think AI development should stop until a global ethical framework is in place

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But there's no strong consensus about who should be leading the charge in determining guidelines around this new technology. When asked if the following groups should play no role, a minor role, a moderate role, or a major role in setting ethical standards for AI, Americans selected these groups for a "major role," suggesting a demand for many types of experience and expertise at the table:

36%
Government agencies

34%
Companies involved in developing the technology

30%
Non-government groups of ethicists and technologists

30%
End users of the technology

26%
Colleges and universities

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Potential uses

We asked Americans to evaluate a number of potential uses for AI and judge whether they seemed reasonable or unreasonable, or good or bad for society.

   Americans are largely uncomfortable with using AI in tasks that involve physical safety – such as autonomous public transportation – and tasks that seem reserved for a human perspective, such as writing a college essay or a religious sermon.

   Americans are more divided about using AI as an assistant or helper, for tasks such as filling out a tax form. But they are open to using AI for work that involves public protection: seeking out false information on social media sites or – despite some noted examples of bias – helping police identify potential criminals.

Percentage of Americans who somewhat or strongly agree that these would be reasonable uses of AI:

Write a college essay:

29%

Write a resume:

60%

Write a religious sermon:

27%

Write a newspaper article:

44%

Percentage of Americans who say these uses of AI would be good for society:

Finding false information on social media sites:

62%

Screening applicants for loans:

32%

Identifying police suspects using facial recognition:

60%

Diagnosing health problems:

48%

Percentage of Americans who say they'd be somewhat or very comfortable with these potential future uses of AI:

Public transportation powered without a human conductor:

22%

Performing surgery unassisted through a robot:

15%

Providing care and companionship to a senior citizen:

18%

Helping you choose clothing in a retail store:

52%

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STEM, gender, and AI

About a tenth of our respondents reported working or having a secondary degree in a STEM field. Perhaps not surprisingly, a background in science and technology correlated with a greater sense of optimism about artificial intelligence and its potential.

People who work or have studied in STEM fields are **more likely** to:

▪ Say that media reports about AI make them optimistic about the future
54.6% of those with a STEM background v. 26.2% without a STEM background

▪ Agree that they understand the benefits of AI
90.7% of those with a STEM background v. 74.3% without a STEM background

▪ Believe that AI won't extinguish humanity
50.5% of those with a STEM background v. 37.5% without a STEM background

Discerning the reasons for these discrepancies will require further study. But one potential takeaway is that a greater education about the AI and its workings could help steer conversations away from hype and fearmongering and into more nuanced discussions of how it can be used responsibly.

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Our survey also found that women, on a whole, are more skeptical than men about the technology and its stewardship. Even correcting for a background in STEM, respondents who identified as female were **less likely** than those who identified as male to:

- Say that media reports about AI make them optimistic about the future
36.5% of men are optimistic v. 22.2% of women

- Understand the benefits of AI
14.2% of men v. 33% of women disagree or aren't sure they understand the benefits of AI

- Believe that AI will be developed responsibly
42.8% of men v. 26.2% of women somewhat or strongly agree that AI wil be developed responsibly

Again, the reasons for these discrepancies will require further study. But the results suggest that the companies engaged in building, sharing, and selling AI tools must commit to – and communicate – the idea that their products won't harm children, families, women, and the population at large.

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Moving forward

Overall, our survey uncovers substantial anxiety and doubt over the future of AI, but also a broad acknowledgment that this technology could be used for the good of society. Deep, rich, informed communication about AI can help move the conversation forward, encouraging nuanced discussions about how to develop and use AI responsibly. That means helping the media – the major conduit of public information about AI – explain the underpinnings, promises, and pitfalls of the technology. It means helping technologists convey the work they're doing and steer their skills toward the public interest. The AI Literacy Lab is working on a range of programming to that end, including:

- Training for journalists in the workings, use, and implications of AI in a range of domains

- Training for technologists in communication and the media ecosystem

- Fellowships pairing journalists and technologists on computer-assisted reporting projects

- Training and mentorship for local news operations on how to cover AI in local communities and use AI in the service of democracy

- Interdisciplinary convenings for students and professionals to discuss developments in AI and frameworks for its governance

Please contact us if you'd like to learn more or support our initiatives.

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