

Hype, hope and hard truths: Cambridge Festival explores AI's impact on society

Artificial intelligence will take centre stage in Cambridge this spring as the [Cambridge Festival](#) delivers a major programme of events exploring how AI is reshaping science, society, culture and the environment.

Running from **16 March to 2 April**, the festival brings together researchers, policymakers, artists, technologists and the public to move beyond the hype, asking what AI is really delivering, who benefits, and how its risks can be managed.

The festival opens on 16 March with *From.Cambridge.to.the.World¿AI.and.Digital.Policy*, a flagship event challenging the AI hype cycle. Drawing on new Cambridge research, the panel asks a question missing from most AI headlines: if the technology is so powerful, why isn't it delivering productivity, growth or better public services? Moving beyond fears of AI 'doom' or talk of an 'AI bubble', the discussion focuses on what's going wrong in real-world adoption – locally, nationally and globally. Featuring AI and innovation experts Professor Dame Diane Coyle, Dr Jeni Tennison OBE and Dr Kathryn Chapman, and chaired by Dr Aleksei Turobov, the event examines what needs to change and how Cambridge research and policy work are shaping real-world outcomes.

AI in action: climate and public good

Across the festival, AI's real-world impact is brought vividly to life. On 21 March, *Developing.AI.Solutions.for.the.Climate* demonstrates how new data science and machine-learning tools being built to support climate scientists, and help governments and communities reduce emissions, prevent flooding and protect ecosystems. Led by researchers from the Institute of Computing for Climate Science, the interactive session invites the public to test how these tools work in practice. Fast-paced, visual and playful, the event brings cutting-edge climate research to life.

Meanwhile, the environmental costs of AI are examined in *AI's.Hidden.Footprint¿The.Environmental.Cost.of.Artificial.Intelligence* on 19 March, which exposes the energy use, resource extraction and e-waste behind today's AI systems, and asks how law, ethics and governance can shape a greener future.

Health, medicine and the life sciences

Public wellbeing takes centre stage on 25 March as *AI.and.the.Future.of.Public.Health* explores how AI is changing our GP and NHS services, and whether it can actually improve the system and protect patients. The panel brings together leading voices across health and research: Neil Lawrence, DeepMind Professor of Machine Learning; Dame Henrietta Hughes, Patient Safety Commissioner for England; Professor Alastair Denniston; Melanie Ivarsson, CEO of Health Data Research Service; and Dr Rozelle Kanne. They will examine how AI is already reshaping public health, from earlier diagnoses to more efficient services, while confronting real-world challenges of access, trust and equity. Hosted by ai@cam, the discussion highlights how local

health services, researchers and communities can work together to ensure AI delivers better outcomes for everyone.

In the life sciences, *Biochemistry and AI on 28 March* brings together three talks on how AI is accelerating biological discovery. Susanne Bornelöv explores AI-driven virtual experiments, Attila Tokoli presents systems that can read and write proteins, and Michael Boemo examines genome replication models for new cancer therapies, followed by a panel discussion.

In *AI and Medicine Maker on 28 March*, AstraZeneca scientists demonstrate how AI is transforming the process of developing new medicines.

Inside the machines: computing power and robotics

Festivalgoers can explore AI's technological backbone through a virtual tour of Dawn, the UK's fastest AI supercomputer, using VR headsets to see how its 1,000 GPUs support research in clean energy, climate science and personalised medicine.

Programming a Swarm of Robots with the Human Voice reveals new AI research that allows people to control groups of robots using natural language. In this live demonstration from the Prorok Lab, audiences can speak commands and watch robot swarms coordinate tasks in real time, from moving objects to navigating shared spaces. Led by PhD researcher Maksymilian Wolski, the demo highlights a shift in robotics, driven by Professor Amanda Prorok, towards collective intelligence – designing AI systems that learn and act together, with implications for autonomous vehicles, drones and real-world robotics.

Creativity, emotion and what it means to be human

Several events explore AI's expanding role in emotional and creative life, including *A Turing Test for Emotional Intelligence*, a provocative experiment that asks whether machines can understand human emotion. Developed by Dr Sam Nallaperuma, whose research focuses on using AI to deliver affordable, accessible digital healthcare tools, the event invites participants to hold conversations with either AI systems or human therapists – without knowing which is which. By putting emotionally intelligent machines to the test, the session probes what the rise of AI therapists could mean for mental health care, trust and the future of human connection.

R.U. NOT HUMAN? Escape from CAPTCHA turns everyday online tests into an interactive game that exposes bias, accessibility issues, and hidden assumptions in AI. Created by Professor Alan Blackwell with artist Sarah Ciston and Cambridge PhD Claire Carroll, the project experiments with new ways to represent technology while inviting participants to question how AI shapes their digital lives.

Literary creativity is examined in *Writing Literary Fiction in the Era of AI*, while *The Human Edge over AI* and *Creativity as Decreation* explores ambiguity, imagination and the limits of machine creativity.

Education, problem-solving and collaboration

AI's impact on learning is explored in *Beyond LLMs* and *The Advent of Generative AI in Educational Paradigms* on **26 March**, demonstrating how teaching and learning are being transformed.

Collaborative thinking takes a playful turn in *Problem_Solving?.More.Like.Problem.Discovery** on 24 March, introducing a gamified tool designed to accelerate the identification of complex challenges across industries.

Ethics, trust and the limits of intelligence

Philosophical debate runs throughout the programme. On 21 March, *Clever.but.Not.Wise¿The.Limits.of.AI.and.the.Space.of.the.Human* examines why intelligence alone is not enough for moral judgement. *Conscious.Machines?* explores whether artificial consciousness is possible, and what it would mean if it were.

Trust, transparency and power are central to *Uncovering.Algorithms¿Conversations.on.the.Impact.of.AI* on 24 March with Natalia Domagala talking about her new book. While *Beyond.the.Buzz¿What.Generative.AI.Means.for.the.Economy*, also on 24 March, sees Dr Melvyn Weeks examine productivity, task displacement and value creation.

Social dynamics online are unpacked in *Words.That.Wound¿Exploring.Online.Offensive.Language* on 21 March, and misinformation takes centre stage in *Traitors¿This.Is.My.Research* on 27 March, an interactive panel and game challenging audiences to spot fake experts and question how trust is built in the digital age.

AI on screen and in culture

The festival officially launches on 18 March with *Ex.Machina¿A.Cambridge.Festival.Screening.with.Evolution.of.Horror*, featuring a film screening followed by a live discussion with Professor Stephen Cave and the *Evolution of Horror* podcast team.

Cambridge Festival 2026 offers a rare opportunity to engage with artificial intelligence from every angle, as a tool, a risk, a creative partner and a profound social force. With events spanning science, policy, culture and public life, the festival invites audiences of all ages to explore how AI is shaping the world – and how we might shape it in return.

The Cambridge Festival runs from 16 March to 2 April 2026. The full programme and tickets are available [here](#).

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For press inquiries, contact: Becky Mann PR | Email: beckymannpr@gmail.com | Phone: 07739 131820

Press images are available [here](#) | **Festival images** are available [here](#).

About the Cambridge Festival: The Cambridge Festival, a multidisciplinary event hosted by the University of Cambridge, is designed to showcase the best in research and innovation. With a diverse range of topics, from science and technology to the arts and humanities, the festival invites the public to engage with experts and ignite their curiosity.

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