The Acceleration of Intelligence: The Meteoric Rise of OpenAI
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In less than a decade, a small research lab called OpenAI has transformed into the engine behind one of the fastest technological shifts in human history. Its tools, most notably, ChatGPT, have reshaped how people learn, work, and communicate, altering the future of human-machine interaction. This article will therefore explore OpenAI's early milestones, its rapid rise to prominence and global impact, and the ethical considerations surrounding the use of artificial intelligence (AI).

OpenAI was founded in December 2015 by Sam Altman, Elon Musk, and a group of leading technologists. They shared the core motivation of ensuring AI would develop in a safe and transparent way to benefit humanity. In its early years (2015-2018), OpenAI ensured transparency with the public, publishing detailed research papers, and openly shared code and datasets through platforms such as GitHub. Such collaborative research manifested in various ways – one notable example being the release of OpenAI Gym in 2016, a toolkit for developing and comparing reinforcement learning algorithms. By 2018, OpenAI had developed the Generative Pre-trained Transformer (GPT) model, setting new benchmarks for language tasks. These early milestones did not just establish OpenAI as a research leader, but laid the foundation for the rapid acceleration that would soon reshape the conversation around AI.

The moment that truly reshaped OpenAI's identity came in 2019, when the organisation made the decision to turn OpenAI from a non-profit research lab to a capped-profit company. This transformative structural change led to the creation of OpenAI LP, which allowed investors to earn up to 100 times their initial investments. Yet, reactions from the AI research community and stakeholders were mixed. Some expressed concerns the new model may compromise OpenAI's foundational mission of ensuring AGI benefits humanity. Following this structural shift, OpenAI entered a period of rapid acceleration marked by a series of groundbreaking advances. The organisation pushed the bounds of large-scale language modelling (LLM) with the release of GPT-2 in 2019, and GPT-3 in 2020, marking revolutionary advancements in natural language processing. OpenAI also furthered the development of AI through the introduction of DALL-E for image generation, and Codex for programming assistance in 2021. Another defining moment for OpenAI came in 2023, when CEO Sam Altman was abruptly fired by the board over concerns that he had not been 'consistently candid in communications', and they had 'lost confidence' over his leadership. Though he was reinstated as CEO a week later, this sparked a week-long crisis. Employee protests and public scrutiny raised questions regarding OpenAI's transparency, accountability, and pace of development – tensions that continue to shape OpenAI today.

The pivotal moment for OpenAI came in November 2022 with the launch of ChatGPT. Unlike previous AI systems, ChatGPT was conversational and accessible, allowing the general public to experience the capabilities of AI firsthand. Its adoption by the public was unprecedented, and within just 5 days of its launch, the platform reached 1 million users. As of November 2025, there are approximately 800 million ChatGPT weekly active users, showcasing how deeply integrated the platform has become in personal and professional workflows.

In the 3 years since the launch of ChatGPT, it has become increasingly clear this technology has led to a cultural shift, influencing everything from education and employment to relationships and communication. Its impact on education has been particularly concerning, as students may now rely on ChatGPT to complete homework or essays, with minimal critical thinking of their own. This risk is also exacerbated by the fact ChatGPT can, and often does, provide incorrect, biassed, or oversimplified answers, leading to a generation that may appear more productive, but less equipped with the analytical and evaluative skills education is meant to develop. However, this does not necessarily mean ChatGPT should be completely left out of the education realm. ChatGPT can bring about a level of personalised learning students can easily use, allowing them access to quick explanations to questions they may need assistance with. In addition, its impact on relationships and communication has also been consequential: AI-driven conversations increasingly replace human interaction, raising concerns about isolation, and the erosion of authentic human connection. According to research by the online dating company

Match, almost half of Gen-Z Americans have reported they have used LLMs such as ChatGPT for dating advice, revealing how embedded AI has become in guiding choices that were once entirely human.

Beyond communication and education, the rise of ChatGPT has also raised serious concerns about job displacements, and economic inequality. It is undeniable AI could bring about higher economic growth, with McKinsey reporting AI could deliver additional global economic activity of around $13 trillion. However, its impact on job displacements has been especially controversial, with many industries now confronting the reality that AI can perform tasks faster, cheaper, and at times, more accurately than humans. A study by Goldman Sachs has reported AI could replace the equivalent of 300 million full-time jobs – around two-thirds of jobs in the US and Europe are exposed to some degree of AI automation. This has also raised questions on economic inequality, particularly as the benefits of AI tend to advantage highly skilled workers and large tech firms disproportionately more. Conversely, many have also argued ChatGPT and other generative AIs may serve as mechanisms for upskilling individuals who face barriers to employment. A study by MIT found that while ChatGPT unsurprisingly raised overall productivity, its effects were most pronounced among lower skilled workers. The tool effectively reduced the performance gap between employees, implying generative AI may function as an equalising technology. Ultimately, the trajectory of ChatGPT's economic impact remains deeply ambivalent, as it can either entrench existing inequalities through large-scale displacement, or help broaden opportunity by supporting lower skilled workers.

As OpenAI continues to shape the technological landscape, the acceleration of its tools presents both extraordinary opportunities and profound challenges. OpenAI's rise has not occurred in isolation. Its competitors, such as Google DeepMind, Gemini, and CoPilot, have each advanced their frontier models, intensifying the race to build safer, more efficient, more powerful AI systems. As we approach the next stage of advanced AI development, the central question is no longer whether AI will transform society, but whose interest that transformation will serve, and whether humanity will be able to guide this acceleration with the responsibility and transparency its scale requires.