

AI in Action: A Major U3A Science Seminar Explores the Promise and Perils of Artificial Intelligence

The Sevenoaks U3A Science Group hosted one of its ambitious and well-attended events on 4 June, when 100 members from across Kent gathered at The Orchard Centre, East Malling, for a half-day seminar titled “**AI in Action.**” The event brought together three leading experts whose work spans agriculture, healthcare, and the ethics of emerging technologies. Their presentations offered a rich, multi-disciplinary exploration of how artificial intelligence is already reshaping society—and what its future trajectory might mean for us all.

The seminar was structured around three distinct but complementary themes:

1. **AI and sustainable food production**
2. **Large language models and the future of healthcare**
3. **The sociological and ethical implications of AI**

Across these topics, a common thread emerged: AI offers extraordinary opportunities, but its rapid development raises profound questions about governance, safety, and the concentration of power. As the summary notes, attendees recognised AI’s “huge potential,” yet expressed concerns about “AI development being in the hands of an ‘elite’ and their commercial operations,” as well as the “comparative immaturity of AI” and the “lack of any regulation of safety or constraints on mis-use.”

What follows is a fuller account of the day’s discussions and the issues that animated this lively and thought-provoking event.

AI and Urban Food Mapping: A New Tool for Sustainable Agriculture

The seminar opened with a presentation by **Dr Howard Lee of Hadlow College**, who explored how artificial intelligence can support sustainable food production, particularly in urban environments. His work on **urban food mapping** demonstrates how AI can help communities better understand where their food comes from, how it is distributed, and how local production might be strengthened.

Urban food mapping uses data—sometimes vast amounts of it—to identify patterns in food availability, land use, and consumption. AI systems can analyse satellite imagery, planning documents, transport networks, and demographic information to reveal opportunities for increasing local food resilience. For example, AI can identify underused land suitable for community gardens, model the carbon impact of different supply chains, or predict how climate change might affect local food security.

Dr Lee’s talk highlighted the potential for AI to support **more sustainable, localised, and equitable food systems**, especially as cities face growing pressures from climate change, population growth, and global supply-chain instability. His work also underscored the

importance of collaboration between technologists, local authorities, and communities—AI may provide the tools, but people must decide how to use them.

Large Language Models and the Future of Healthcare

The second presentation, delivered by **Professor Julia Ive of University College London**, shifted the focus to healthcare—one of the sectors undergoing the most rapid transformation due to AI. Her talk examined how **large language models (LLMs)**, the technology behind modern conversational AI systems, are being developed to support clinicians, researchers, and patients.

LLMs can already summarise medical literature, assist with diagnostic reasoning, and help clinicians manage the overwhelming volume of information generated in modern medicine. Professor Ive discussed how these systems might soon support personalised treatment plans, improve patient communication, and reduce administrative burdens that currently consume so much of clinicians' time.

However, she also emphasised the challenges. Medical data is sensitive, complex, and often incomplete. AI systems must be transparent, reliable, and rigorously tested before being deployed in clinical settings. The risk of errors—especially when dealing with vulnerable patients—means that AI must augment, not replace, human expertise.

Her presentation raised important questions about **trust, accountability, and data governance**. Who is responsible when an AI-supported decision goes wrong? How can we ensure that AI systems are trained on representative data? And how do we prevent commercial interests from shaping healthcare technologies in ways that may not align with public needs?

The Sociological and Ethical Implications of AI

The final talk, by **Dr Blay Whitby**, recently retired from Sussex University, broadened the discussion to the societal and ethical dimensions of AI. Dr Whitby has long argued that AI is not merely a technical development but a social one, with implications for democracy, employment, privacy, and human identity.

He explored the risks of **concentrated power**, noting that AI development is increasingly dominated by a small number of large corporations and well-funded research labs. This concern was echoed in the seminar summary, which highlighted attendees' unease about "AI development being in the hands of an 'elite' and their commercial operations."

Dr Whitby also addressed the **immaturity of current AI systems**. Despite their impressive capabilities, today's AI models often lack robustness, transparency, and the ability to explain their reasoning. This immaturity, combined with the absence of effective regulation, creates opportunities for misuse—whether intentional or accidental.

Ethical issues discussed included:

- The potential for AI to reinforce existing social inequalities
- The challenge of ensuring fairness and avoiding bias in automated systems
- The need for democratic oversight of AI development
- The importance of public understanding and engagement

His talk encouraged attendees to think not only about what AI can do, but what it *should* do—and who gets to decide.

A Lively and Engaged Audience

One of the most striking aspects of the seminar was the level of engagement from the 100 attendees, who represented U3As from across Kent as well as Sevenoaks. The discussion sessions were animated, thoughtful, and wide-ranging, reflecting both curiosity and concern.

Participants asked probing questions about the pace of AI development, the risks of misinformation, the future of work, and the role of government in regulating emerging technologies. Many expressed enthusiasm for the potential benefits of AI in fields such as medicine, environmental management, and education. At the same time, they voiced worries about safety, ethics, and the possibility that AI could be misused in ways that undermine social cohesion or democratic values.

The summary captures this duality well: attendees recognised AI’s “huge potential,” but also highlighted the “lack of any regulation of safety or constraints on mis-use.” This balance—optimism tempered by caution—characterised the tone of the entire event.

Reflections and Next Steps

“AI in Action” demonstrated the value of bringing together experts from different disciplines to explore a rapidly evolving field. The seminar succeeded not only in informing attendees but also in stimulating debate about how society should navigate the opportunities and challenges ahead.

The Sevenoaks Science Team is planning to run a seminar in 2027. The topic for this will be announced in future Newsletters.