Aidan Jay McCahill

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Links to articles: https://tulanehullabaloo.com/staff_name/aidan-mccahill/
https://thelensnola.org/2024/01/29/down-the-drain/

EDUCATION

Tulane University New Orleans, LA
School of Liberal Arts, *Bachelor of Arts in Economics* May 2024
Double Major: Economics, Pre-Medical Track
GPA: 3.8; MCAT: 514; Honors: Tulane Founder's Scholarship ($28,000), Deans List (2020, 2021, 2022, 2023)

Relevant Coursework: Environmental Journalism, Environmental Humanities, Creative Writing

EXPERIENCE

Tulane Hullabaloo New Orleans, LA
Associate News Editor September 2022 – Present
- Write long-form articles incorporating photojournalism on topics ranging from artificial intelligence to campus drug use to criminal justice. Currently profiling the town of Jean Lafitte to raise awareness about Louisiana's receding coastline
- Edit articles weekly for the News section, manage and advise contributing writers on deadlines

The Lens New Orleans, LA
Intern Reporter August 2023 – February 2024
- Created a four-part series of articles educating the public on decaying water infrastructure in New Orleans
- Discussed unaffordable water bills with community members, city officials and nonprofits
- Collaborated with veteran New Orleans Reporter and Editor Katy Reckdahl

Commander's Palace New Orleans, LA
Backwaiter January 2024 – Present
- Work in a three-person team of waiters at one of New Orleans's premier fine dining restaurants
- Responsible for the maintenance of 6-7 tables at once, taking orders, busing tables, and presenting courses

Tulane School of Tropical Medicine New Orleans, LA
Research Assistant August 2023 – December 2023
- Worked with Dr. John Schieffelin on various NIH-funded projects
- Sorted and handled Ebola, Covid-19, and Lassa Fever blood samples
- Performed ELISA testing to establish links between Ebola survivors and Covid-19 antibodies

Alaska Recreational Management Cooper Landing, AK
Deckhand June 2023 – August 2023
- Transported fishermen on one of Alaska's premier salmon fishing rivers, the Kenai River
- Cooperated with Alaska Fish and Game, kept fishermen safe from bears, moose and capsized boats
- Resolved customer complaints on a daily basis

DIVISION 1 ATHLETICS

Tulane University Football New Orleans, LA
Linebacker Summer 2020 – Spring 2023
- Competed at the Division 1 level in the American Athletic Conference and helped the Green Wave become Cotton Bowl Champion and the American Athletic Conference Champion
- Devoted an average of 30+ hours per week to conditioning, meetings, and travel responsibilities
- Acquired team-development skills, work ethic, and time-management skills under coach Willie Fritz

VOLUNTEERING

Ochsner Health, *Volunteer* – New Orleans, LA August 2022 – February 2023
- Assisted nurses in the ER with patient care and communication with families. Shadowed physicians

One World Surgery/NPH Honduras, *Volunteer* – Tegucigalpa, Honduras July 2018 – July 2018
- Assistant surgical technician. Helped doctors provide services to locals who couldn't afford regular care

SKILLS AND INTERESTS

Computer/Technical: Microsoft Excel, Search Engine Optimization, Lab Testing
Language: Spanish (Proficient)
Personal Interests: American Literature, Fly Fishing, Grunge Rock/Nu Metal

Links to my articles: https://tulanehullabaloo.com/staff_name/aidan-mccahill/

Thrill, threat or therapy? Inside ketamine use on Tulane's campus

Aidan McCahill, Associate News Editor
March 13, 2024

Nathan Rich

Ketamine use is prominent in some Tulane social circles, representing an uptick in its illegal and medical use nationally. From its creation in 1962, ketamine has been widely used, but still remains a mystery.

In the mid 1970s, John C. Lilly, a physician and neuropsychiatrist at the University of Pennsylvania, searched for a cure for his migraines. A leading figure in the counterculture movement, Lilly was known for pushing the bounds of neuroscience research. He promoted the use of LSD and other hallucinogenic drugs, developed a saltwater isolation tank to test sensory deprivation and, funded by NASA in the 1960s, began attempting to communicate with dolphins.

Then he stumbled upon an interesting new drug.

Synthesized in 1962 as a safer alternative to Phencyclidine, or PCP, ketamine — a dissociative anesthetic — was first tested on prisoners in Jackson, Michigan, before being used to treat wounded soldiers in the Vietnam War. In addition to relieving Lilly's migraines, "Vitamin K" as he called it, was revelatory in his work on expanding human consciousness; he began to frequently write about it and incorporate it into his research. In the coming decades,

ketamine became standard in veterinary clinics and emergency rooms, while recreational use ebbed and flowed in America, finding niches in underground rave scenes.

Today, evidence suggests ketamine is on the path to the mainstream, both clinically and recreationally. Between 2017 and 2022, law enforcement seizures of illegal ketamine increased by 349.1%, according to a recent study done by the New York University School of Global Public Health. A new industry of ketamine clinics is forecasted to reach $6.9 billion in revenue by 2030. Its rise has ignited debates — both nationally and on Tulane's campus — over its wide range of uses, from treating depression to safer partying.

Names of sources who preferred to remain anonymous have been changed or omitted, fearing personal and professional repercussions.

"I think it's had a presence at Tulane for a while, but I think in the past two years, it has gotten way more popular," said Christian, a senior from New Jersey. He attributes the rise in use among Tulane students to studying abroad. "During our COVID year, no one was going abroad. But after that, when people started going again and coming back, I saw a huge rise."

Christian still remembers the first time he tried ketamine at a date party junior year.

"I didn't even know what it was," he said. Since then he describes using it once every few weeks. "You take a bump and you feel it instantly … you feel so euphoric."

Others dispute study abroad's influence. "Since being back, especially during Mardi Gras, I've seen way more ketamine usage than I did in Spain. It seems to be super accessible here now and is getting more and more normalized," wrote one Tulane junior.

"If you're in Greek life, it's very accessible," Christian said.

Growing influence

Even tamer students, assuming they have internet access, have likely become familiar with the drug. Elon Musk touts its use for depression, "Friends" actor Matthew Perry died of its acute effects and subreddits like r/Ketamemes poke fun at its use. Ketamine even made an appearance in season one of the popular show "White Lotus."

In its recreational uses, ketamine has a history in nightlife scenes. Ed Gillet, in his book "Party Lines," detailing the history of UK dance music, suggests ketamine's possible connection to minimal techno music. A Rolling Stone article describes ketamine's presence in San Francisco's queer club environments.

Some even attribute "Ketamine chic," a fashion movement that debuted at London Fashion Week, to the underground rave scene. And various songs implicitly or explicitly mention the drug.

Tulane, no stranger to party or pop culture, fits the mold.

'Euphoric, inebriating effects'

"It's going to induce experiences that to a certain extent, feel like a psychedelic, but it's not a classical psychedelic," said Senior Professor of Practice James Cronin, who teaches a graduate course on psychedelics at Tulane.

Drugs like LSD and psilocybin, or magic mushrooms, target the brain's 5-HT2A receptors, which normally bind to serotonin, the body's mood-regulating neurotransmitter. When signals from these receptors are enhanced by psychedelics, it can disrupt areas like the thalamus, which processes sensory information before it reaches consciousness.

"Now you've got information bouncing around in ways that it shouldn't," Cronin said, "that's a trip … you see sound and you taste colors."

Though research is ongoing, one theory is that ketamine blocks NMDA receptors on inhibitory interneurons in the brain, responsible for regulating its main excitatory molecule, glutamate.

"You inhibit the inhibitor," said Cronin. "What happens? You get a big upregulation of glutamate in the cortex."

When glutamate floods this outer portion of the brain, the main source of consciousness, it disrupts communication with the rest of the brain.

"That disassociation also has euphoric, inebriating effects," said Cronin.

The surge in glutamate is also believed to have downstream effects that may contribute to neuroplasticity, the brain's ability to form new or reorganized connections between neurons. These connections, or synapses, are thought to be damaged by stress and depression.

In recent years, the drug has garnered massive attention as a possible alternative for treating depression in populations resistant selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors. SSRIs are the most commonly prescribed antidepressants.

"Ketamine seems to give immediate dramatic relief to depression in this population," said Cronin, though after returning from a psychedelics conference, maintained researchers "don't know squat" on how it actually does this.

Despite the uncertainty, its potential as an antidepressant has given rise to what many media outlets call a "Ketamine Boom" in America. Hundreds of clinics have popped up around the country, offering intravenous ketamine infusions in exchange for a few hundred bucks. Silicon Valley has taken notice too. Startups like Mindbloom and Tripsitter now offer subscription services to mail ketamine lozenges.

“The problem is it wears off in two weeks,” Cronin said. Patients are told to come back to sustain its therapeutic effects.
Recently the FDA approved a nasal spray, esketamine — or Spravato — a slightly altered molecule with similar effects. But most clinics administer off-label, or unapproved ketamine, and the burgeoning industry operates largely without regulations.

Therapeutic frontier
Still, the novel treatments offer hope to many.

Cole, a Tulane junior, struggled with depression his entire life.

“I was on Prozac for years,” he said, “it was really difficult.”

When nothing seemed to work, Cole was eventually prescribed ketamine. At first, a friend would drive him to his psychiatrist’s office twice a week, where he was administered ketamine prepared at a local compounding pharmacy. The effect wasn’t a trip for him, but rather a calm, drawn-out mellow feeling. In the morning his depressive thoughts would be gone.

“When you’re on ketamine, especially in a clinical setting, it’s a place to reflect on everything that might be causing your depression,” he said. “You start to talk to yourself and know yourself better and learn ways of talking yourself off the ledge that you didn’t necessarily know that you could do before.”

Gradually, infusions were tapered off to once a month before Cole stopped them completely, feeling he gained new tools to deal with his depression.

“At this point, I feel like more of a person, whereas I felt hollow before.”

Is it safe(r)?

Outside the sterile confines of a clinical environment, questions of safety become murkier. Matthew, a senior majoring in finance, recalls taking too much ketamine at a DJ concert over Mardi Gras and feeling “exhausted and out of it.”

Other than that, he believes there are few risks.

As a sophomore, Matthew recalls seeing ketamine use rise in his fraternity, driven by fears of fentanyl-laced coke.

“It just seemed like more of a safer drug than cocaine,” Matthew said, who along with Christian, believes its granular nature makes it easier to tell whether it’s the real thing or not.

Many students also see it as a less addictive alternative to cocaine, with a reduced likelihood of overdosing. It also doesn’t keep you up all night, they say, and there’s little hangover.

A source familiar with drug distribution on campus, offered a more sobering view. “It’s a powder,” he said. “The quality control on certain powders in New Orleans can be poor.”

“Years ago, most recreational ketamine was stolen from local veterinarian offices,” said Joseph Palamar, co-author of the NYU study. According to the DEA New Orleans Division, most illegally obtained ketamine comes from legitimate sources or is smuggled in from Mexico.

“I’m gonna tell you now it’s not from medical facilities,” said the source familiar with Tulane’s supply, “I’ve seen some come from Pakistan or China, but India seems to be the biggest source.”

Oftentimes it’s not actually ketamine, he says, but an analog known as 2-Fluorodeschloroketamine that’s reported to be stronger than ketamine, though its pharmacological effects remain unclear.

First synthesized in 2014, 60 cases of confirmed exposure to this new drug have been reported, according to the World Health Organization.

For most users though, the biggest fear is entering the “K-hole,” an intense, out-of-body experience resulting from overconsumption of the drug. This detachment from reality can last for hours.

“I’ve seen kids do lines and just turn into absolute zombies,” said Christian. During his sophomore year, he witnessed one of his closest friends enter the K-hole.

“He couldn’t tell you a thing from what happened that night,” said Christian.

Known short-term side effects of ketamine include elevated blood pressure and vomiting. When used in conjunction with alcohol or other depressants, it can lead to respiratory depression and death.

As someone who went to Loyola University in the 1970s, drug fads are not a novel idea for Cronin. He’s seen the popularity of LSD and even Quaaludes rise and fall with each decade and theorized that the process is likely accelerated today by social media.

“There’s a difference between 1976 and 2024,” he said. “There wasn’t something out there remotely comparable to fentanyl.”

In addition to the risks of fentanyl poisoning, there’s little known about ketamine’s long-term effects on the brain.

John C. Lilly never quite established communication with dolphins, even with the help of ketamine. The project was halted after rumors surfaced of bestiality and dolphins being injected with LSD. He did, reportedly, encounter other-dimensional beings on the drug. "That evening I took 150 milligrams of ketamine," Lilly said in one interview. "And suddenly the Earth Coincidence Control Office removed my penis and handed it to me."

Years of self-administering ketamine landed Lilly in a psychiatric ward. Around the same time, the Nixon administration's "War on Drugs" largely banned other promising research into psychedelics.

Today, ketamine's solutions — for depression — and setbacks — for substance abuse — are mostly uncharted.

And decades after Lilly's migraines, the drug is still a mystery that Tulane students seem to be exploring.

"The undergraduate population is a longitudinal study," Cronin said.

Angola Prison Rodeo: Last vestige of gladiators

Aidan McCahill, Associate News Editor
November 3, 2023

Gallery • 5 Photos

Aidan McCahill

Angola rough-riders opened up the rodeo show riding around the arena with large flags.

A broken arm, torn ligaments and a life sentence cannot stop Myron Smith. He is a Louisiana cowboy.

This is Angola Prison, where Smith serves for first-degree murder. An hour northwest of Baton Rouge, past church signs that flash “Jesus didn’t come to condemn,” over rolling hills and forested ravines, Louisiana Highway 66 reaches a dead end just before the Mississippi border.

The land is a former slave plantation. Named after the country many of its slaves originated from, Angola is the largest maximum security prison in the United States. It houses

nearly 5,000 prisoners, about 85% of whom are serving life sentences on the 18,000-acre plot of farmland.

Since the 1960s, every Sunday in October Angola has turned into a Wild West-style rodeo. The two-lane highway leading to the prison is packed with motorists seeking a form of entertainment likened to the days of Caesar. For $20, thousands of visitors flock to rural Louisiana to witness the "The Wildest Show in the South." Formally known as the Angola Prison Rodeo, prisoners compete in traditional rodeo events like bull riding and bareback riding — and also some unconventional and even gruesome competitions.

Smith has competed in the rodeo since 2006. "I have a lot of excitement and adrenaline for this stuff," he said. "It's an adventure."

On one October Sunday, Smith summed up his pregame feelings with one word: "hungry." Smith's favorite event is the finale, "Guts and Glory," where prisoners compete to grab a poker chip tied to the forehead of a confused and enraged 2,000-pound bull. He's won the event 21 times. He also competes in "wild cow milking," where two teammates try to restrain a bull while Smith attempts to retrieve a dollop of milk for the judges.

During the rest of the year, he works on the prison farm, cutting grass. At the rodeo, he can make anywhere from $200 to $2,000, an exorbitant amount of money in a place where prisoners typically make about 2 to 75 cents an hour. Smith said he sends the money home to take care of his kids and grandkids.

Another hardened participant of the rodeo is lifer Travis R. Johnson, known among Angolites as "Buckethead," a name he explained was earned through "doing small stupid stuff."

Travis R. Johnson, known among Angolites as "Buckethead." (Aidan McCahill)

Johnson has competed in the rodeo for the last 20 years. The first few were not easy.

Because the prisoners do not get any instruction for the games, “it’s been on-the-job training right here in the arena,” he said. “I’ve had a lot of losses to learn how to win.”

When Johnson isn’t dodging bulls, he’s breaking horses. Johnson is one of Angola’s cowboys. He said he’s found his passion in the work. Some of the horses being used in the rodeo, he has trained himself.

“If you go by my bed and look under my mattress the first thing you gon see is a horse trainer magazine. Or you reach this way you go see a book because I study,” Johnson said. “I always want to get better.”

Despite its popularity among competitors, many believe the rodeo is exploitative: a cruel, barbaric, warped form of entertainment. Every event is volunteer only but can be extremely dangerous.

“Convict poker,” for example, involves four prisoners sitting around a red table ostensibly playing a game of cards. Suddenly a bull is released into the arena. The man with the nerve to stay in his chair the longest wins. After the dust settles, it’s not unusual to see a few inmates carried out on stretchers.

Warden Tim Hooper sees it differently. “It gives them an adventure,” he said, shooting a suspicious glance from his golf cart. “It gives them something to look forward to.”
It’s also a way to maintain law and order during the rest of the year. Only the well-behaved prisoners have the chance to compete in front of thousands, walk among civilians and meet family and friends in person.

Under the guise of safety, inmates wear padded vests and helmets resembling those worn by hockey players. As for the medical attention, “I got the best paramedics and the best doctors,” Hooper said. “If I was gonna have a heart attack, this is where I’d want it to happen.”

For inmates endowed with less chutzpah, the rodeo offers a chance to sell arts and crafts and raise money for themselves and prison programs. Many spend the entire year preparing for the event, constructing furniture, crafting leather wallets and painting everything from kitschy LSU gameday art to surrealist African folk portraits.

The more disorderly, sex offenders or recent tenants who have not proven reliable to mingle with the general population can still showcase their compositions. Their galleries just happen to be behind a row of steel bars.

For the past four Sundays, New Orleans native Morlon Newman has stood outside a tent selling teddy bears. So far this fall, Newman said he’s made three to four thousand dollars. Six foot two with a bulky build and tattoos, Newman, aka “Flash,” doesn’t look like the typical stuffed animal salesman. The other six days of the week he’s serving life for first-degree murder.

Myron Smith won the Guts and Glory competition 21 times since 2006. (Aidan McCahill)

For Newman, who has been in Angola for 28 years, the rodeo is a chance to raise money for his drug rehabilitation program. Up until a few years ago, he struggled with addiction and contemplations of suicide.

Then, "March 15th, 2018, I had an encounter with God," he said. "And he took the drugs away from me, and since then kind of put it on my heart to help people who are like me." Newman pointed to another guy selling teddy bears, "I moved him in a dormitory with me and kind of nursed him back to health. And then from there I just started grabbing other guys and started having support groups and education building."

After talking to the warden and gaining a seminary degree, he has structured a 90-day rehab program. Newman now has 30 additional mentors, all of whom are former drug addicts who went through the program.

Luther McFarland sells barbecue pits he learned to make from the prison's welding program. He's been in prison for the past 19 years.

"This is my passion," McFarland said, and he now teaches other inmates to weld. He plans to use his revenue to buy more barbecues and pay for paralegal courses.

With an often sold-out 10,000-person arena, the prison nets about $200,000 per weekend in ticket sales. Along with food and merchandise, the event can generate millions of dollars a year. Much of that revenue funds the prison's 14 vocational training programs.

Outside the arena, a local car dealer hands out free merchandise. He employs dozens of former inmates, many of whom he said are key employees. One former lifer, released on parole for good behavior, came back to the rodeo with his wife and grandchild to visit his former correctional officers. He credited the vocational and rehabilitation programs for his success.

“They leave here with the ability to make 60, 70, 80, $100,000 a year, which was a pipe dream for them before they came in here,” spokesperson Ken Pastorick said.

Yet when anyone asks the Louisiana Department of Corrections to interview prisoners, they will invariably be shown success stories. When the communications department hovers around, prisoners respond in a bubbly fashion to questions about what life is like on the inside.

But Angola did not achieve the epithet “America’s bloodiest prison” by selling teddy bears. The reality is darker.

The vast majority of inmates work in fields harvesting wheat, corn, soybeans, cotton and milo, while underpaid prison guards, often with a penchant for violence, oversee the work. Sometimes the guards are accompanied by wolf-dog hybrids. With nearly 75% of the prison population being Black, it takes little imagination to understand why the penitentiary has been compared to modern-day chattel slavery.

This past summer, Angola made headlines for locking juveniles, some as young as 14 years old, in cells without air conditioning for several days. Heat indexes in the surrounding area reached 133 degrees during that time. And in 2020, Angola made national headlines for ignoring COVID-19 policies, despite pleas from inmates. Their current medical director served in federal prison for buying $8,000 worth of methamphetamine in a Home Depot parking lot.

The rodeo’s financing has not always been transparent. A 2017 audit revealed that $6 million of revenue from the rodeo between 2014 and 2015 was not deposited with the Louisiana State Treasury or DOC budget, violating the state’s constitution.

But at the rodeo, the darkness is not evident. Amid the artwork and hobby craft, one prisoner proudly posed for pictures while children pet the service dog beside him. In the background, an inmate band played Neil Young’s “Keep on Rockin’ in the Free World.” The atmosphere was jovial. Inmates talked with guards and civilians. During the rodeo, they laughed and cheered each other on.

Despite its notoriety, despite being in a state with the highest incarceration rate in the world and despite uncertainty around the repeal of recent criminal justice reforms, hope still prevails in Louisiana State Penitentiary. Inmates like Newman can lift others out from valleys of despair.

Jeffrey Hillburn, a lifer and editor of The Angolite, the inmate-run magazine, explained what seemed to be a common thread among Angola’s success stories, a philosophy he’s learned from 33 years as a writer in prison:

“If I do right every day, and if I get up and I help people, then that door gets opened a little bit more,” he said.

Other states are looking at Angola’s pilot program, launched in 2010, where lifers serve as mentors for nonviolent offenders, teaching them job skills and morals to prepare them for life outside. In Oklahoma, the DOC is advocating for a $9.3 million plan to revive their own rodeo, which shut down in 2009.

Before “Guts and Glory,” Smith and Buckethead turned back and cheerfully gave a thumbs-up. This was their time to shine. Two seasoned veterans of the Super Bowl for the institutionalized, ready to seize a bounty worthy of Angolite aristocracy. In the end, while other prisoners hung on the outskirts watching timidly, Buckethead valiantly plucked the poker chip from the bull’s forehead to the chorus of 10,000 roars.

The rodeo has taught Buckethead determination and responsibility. He views it as a way to earn money the right way. “When I lay down I can feel good,” he said. “Because I went out and tried to earn my money. And I know I can take that with me wherever I go.”

“A devastation”: How infamous expressway sliced NOLA neighborhood in half

Aidan McCahill, Associate News Editor • October 4, 2023

Gallery • 4 Photos

Arvin Frank Pelle, Courtesy of New Orleans Historic Collection

Once the home of over 120 business, North Claiborne Avenue was known as “The Black Wallstreet.”

Louis Charbonnet III leaned across his desk one afternoon and faced the road he despises.

He pointed out the window, past the fences he constructed to keep out intruders and to the roaring Claiborne Expressway.

“That,” Charbonnet said, “was a devastation to the Black community.”

Anyone who ventures into downtown New Orleans usually reaches the overpass, an elevated part of Interstate 10 that runs above North Claiborne Avenue. But beneath it, the city’s

realities endure: homeless encampments. Drug dealers. Prostitutes. The overpass is so hated it has gained the nickname "The Monster."

But more than anything, the neighbors in its shadows hate the Claiborne overpass because it cuts through the heart and soul of New Orleans: Treme.
Charbonnet considers himself lucky. His funeral home business, Charbonnet Family Services, was one of the few that survived the overpass' construction.

Charbonnet said the expressway was initially good for his generationally-owned business, which has served the Treme since 1883. It allowed him to buy up excess property and expand his business.

Now, the overpass is destroying it. "I've been fighting hard to stay," he said, "It's still not attractive for people to come here."

Treme's history

"From the early existence of Treme, when Claude Treme started selling lots around 1810, a significant population of free people of color began to buy lots in that particular area," said historian and Treme resident Raynard Sanders. Widely acknowledged as the oldest Black neighborhood in the country, Treme became a thriving commercial hub during the Antebellum period. Due to segregation in surrounding areas of the city, this 22-block area, situated between Elysian Fields Avenue and Canal Street was home to over 120 Black-owned businesses.

Those businesses comprised "just about everything the community needed" according to Sanders, including pharmacies, insurance companies, doctor's offices, coffee shops and grocery stores. Many of these ran along North Claiborne Avenue, whose concrete median ground today was once a lush neutral ground, home to over 400 oak trees and a place for residents to picnic and celebrate Black Mardi Gras.

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, commercial success and community stability gave rise to flourishing culture and activism. Benevolent societies like Economy Hall organized trips to Washington D.C. to meet with President Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, and the citizen's committee that arranged Plessy v. Ferguson resided in Treme. Congo Square, where enslaved African Americans would sing and dance on Sundays, sits around the corner, providing the roots for America's original art form that would refine itself in the same area.

"All of the early jazz musicians lived and performed in and around North Claiborne Avenue," Sanders said. "It was a 24-hour street, easily seven nights a week there were five or six live bands playing up and down Claiborne Avenue," he added, and later in the '40s and '50s, Professor Longhair would play in these nightclubs, pioneering another new form of music: rhythm and blues.

As the 20th century progressed and automobiles became pervasive, there was a need to create infrastructure on par with America's rapidly growing suburbs. According to Georgetown University historian Greg Beaman, controversial urban planner Robert Moses helped design two plans in 1946 to revitalize New Orleans's interstate system — one in the French Quarter and one in Treme. After a massive effort to overturn state and national proposals for the French Quarter Riverfront Expressway, dubbed "The Second Battle of New Orleans," the Department of Transportation canceled the project in 1969.

But plans for an interstate in Treme continued. The initial idea was to widen Claiborne from four to six lanes but evolved in 1957 to constructing an overpass. According to Beaman, the government started buying up property in 1964 and in 1969 construction was completed.

"A common conception is that after the French Quarter riverfront expressway was defeated, then they moved that plan back to Claiborne," Beaman said. "But Claiborne had always been part of the plan."
The difference in outcomes reflected the broader political and social dynamics of the time.

"Why didn't anyone step in and try to save Claiborne Avenue?" Beaman said. "I think one of the main answers is that African Americans were excluded from the political process.

While wealthy whites lobbied Washington, Treme residents were not even notified of the project until it was too late. There's scant evidence suggesting media outlets covered the plans at all, according to Beaman.

"It destroyed really the African American town square," Sanders, who was a high school student living in Treme at the time, said. "And without any regard for the people who lived there, there was no communication. There were no town hall meetings, even though by law they were supposed to have those discussions."

The city bulldozed oak trees and seized properties through eminent domain. Reports estimate over 500 homes were destroyed. Businesses that were not bought or taken out physically "died on the vine," Sanders said. "I think we have less than 20 now."

As the divided neighborhood began to deteriorate, the civil rights movement gained strength, and many Treme residents including Charbonnet and Sanders began advocating for the removal of the overpass.

"I've been fighting this battle since the 1960s," Charbonnet said. He went on to serve in the state legislature from 1970 to 1984 largely on the platform of removal.

Meanwhile, Sanders graduated high school and joined the Tambourine and Fan Educational and Cultural Center, which partnered with the Congress of Racial Equality and The Claiborne Avenue Design Team to make recommendations for improvement. Yet despite years of activism at City Hall and the state legislature, the Monster has remained.

“The fact is … we still don’t have the political strength,” Charbonnet said.
Today, talks of renovation and removal of the overpass continue. In 2021, the Biden administration called out the I-10 overpass in its $1 billion Reconnecting Communities program, a component of the infrastructure bill designed to fund revitalization of communities historically harmed by highways and other infrastructure. Despite the renewed attention, community ambivalence and poor city planning have stalled potential opportunities.

City plans included removing the ramps going to and from Esplanade Avenue and Orleans Avenue, keeping but repairing the overpass above and turning the corridor underneath into a marketplace. Projected to cost $95 million, it is unclear how much funding from the Department of Transportation the city would eventually receive.

As Amy Stelly sat in the Treme community center discussing the future of the overpass, it became clear that Treme residents were still excluded from decision making. After the city and state presented its plans to the DOT, they received $500,000 — a fraction of what they applied for and what other communities around the country received. According to Stelly, who is a co-founder of the Claiborne Avenue Alliance, the demonstration by the city failed because it was not vetted with the community.

“It was actually a slap in the face,” she said.

Circle Grocery Store, circa 1954, New Orlean’s first black-owned grocery store, still standing today on Claiborne and St. Bernard. (Arvin Frank Pelle, Courtesy of New Orleans Historic Collection)

Claiborne’s future

Yet there are murmurs within the community that removal or renewal may not be the best option. During Katrina, the overpass was a necessary refuge from flooding. Some argue removal could accelerate gentrification, an issue Treme has dealt with for decades. Then

there is the issue of the city actually building and maintaining new infrastructure, something New Orleans residents have grown weary of.

Still, some residents want complete removal of the overpass. Others say they would embrace any improvement.

“We’ll be thankful that we just get the ramps taken down,” Charbonnet said, which would decrease unnecessary traffic, remove cover for criminal activity and open opportunities for further projects.


Murals like these were painted by local artists in 2002. (Aidan McCahill)

Charbonnet and Stelly plan to continue their advocacy. Stelly and her organization recently received a $500,000 Environmental Protection Agency grant to collect health data under the overpass with the help of the LSU School of Public Health. Meanwhile, Sanders and Beaman continue to tell the story of Treme’s people. Sanders and his organization, The Claiborne Avenue Historical Project, plan to release a 90-minute documentary on the issue around 2025.

As the stalemate continues, the overpass seems to be getting worse. Needles are an increasingly common sight below, while many streetlights above remain broken. Estimated costs to maintain the expressway are upwards of $50 million.

“There’s a school right there,” Stelly said. “There are children who walk across Claiborne to get to that school, and they’ve had to walk to school with the coroner’s office right there carrying away a dead body.”

“They’ve had to pass prostitutes, male and female, in the morning going to school.”

But signs of defiance exist too.

There are murals painted on support columns. Some depict oak trees.

Others feature local artists trying to reclaim a semblance of cultural identity.

Despite everything, the surrounding community retains the traditions that have made it one of America's most unique communities. Its jazz museums, brass bands and Creole restaurants will continue to attract hipsters and HBO cameras, while longtime residents work to preserve its original fabric.

Outside Charbonnet's window, as the tires of over 130,000 cars a day desperately navigate the crumbling pavement, the heart of New Orleans keeps on pumping.

Imitation game: Can AI rival student intellect?

Aidan McCahill, Associate News Editor
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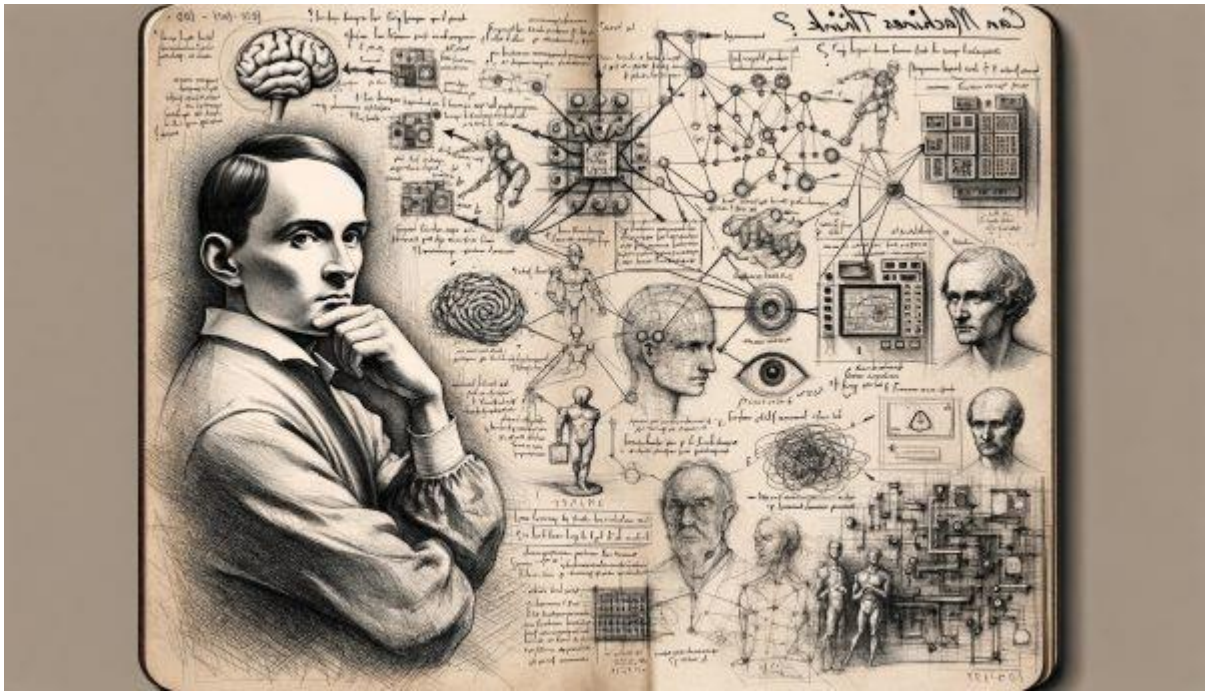
Can machines think?

Proposed by British computer scientist Alan Turing, it is arguably the most famous opening line of an academic paper and a question that continues to be debated 70 years after it was written. Titled "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," Turing's paper laid the philosophical foundation for what many today believe, for better or worse, will dramatically change society: artificial intelligence.



Colin Norton, a senior studying finance and accounting, rendered these images depicting the evolution of AI using Dall-E. This one portrays Alan Turing in the style of Leonardo da Vinci's lab notebook. (Colin Norton)

On these grounds, the prompt Tulane University professor and author Walter Isaacson gave to students of his "Digital Revolution" class made perfect sense: "Describe the development of artificial intelligence from Turing to large language model chatbots (LLMs)."

It was a seemingly straightforward assignment, complicated by one condition.

"Take that prompt," said Isaacson, pointing to the projector, "and put it into any chatbot."

"Make it so it comes up to about 3,000 words," he said. Most chatbots give a maximum response of about 800 words. "I want you to put where you used your intuition … where can you be creative?"

Isaacson encouraged students to make their papers as unique as possible, as long as they stayed informative. The grade would be divided between the quality of the final paper and how students explained their thought process.

Hands shot up in a packed Herbert Hall lecture room. Could students use multiple chatbots? How many iterations would it take? How would they explain how they got our final product?

“Use your judgment,” Isaacson replied again and again, barring one exception. He asked students to track down and cite their sources, which most chatbots do not provide outright. “It is a history class,” said Isaacson, “not a class on how to cheat and write a paper.” He promised extra credit if a student spotted a hallucination, a poorly understood limitation whereby a chatbot generates incorrect information and presents it as if it were true.

It was the first stage of a semester-long class experiment, where students took 15 minutes at the end of each class to share their progress on their final papers.

“Isaacson kind of left it open to us,” said William Bai, a senior studying cell and molecular biology.

“One of the essences of the digital age is it’s about collaboration and peer-to-peer sharing,” said Isaacson, an acclaimed biographer who spent years profiling tech titans like Elon Musk and Steve Jobs.

Generative AI explodes

Turing’s seminal work judged a machine’s intelligence by its ability to hold a conversation indistinguishable from that of a human. He believed machines could “think” if they passed this test. Dubbed today as the “Turing test,” some researchers argue large language models, a form of generative AI that powers modern chatbots, have broken that test.

Trained on massive amounts of text — hundreds of billions of words — from the internet, LLMs can learn the statistical patterns of language. By anticipating the words that are likely to follow a user-prompted question, LLMs can generate human-like conversations.

When Microsoft-backed Open AI launched ChatGPT-3 in November of 2022, educators around the country sounded the alarm. Students drooled at a new frontier of cheating, while English teachers around the country prepared for unemployment.

Despite many high schools banning ChatGPT, software designed to detect chatbot use has proven unreliable. Since ChatGPT’s first launch, a horde of new chatbots have reached the public; Musk has Grock, Google has Gemini and Meta has Llama.

Outside big tech, startups like Anthropic and Perplexity have also joined the scene. Their influence is growing too — evidence of chatbot use has seeped into the abstracts of academic

journals, and author Rie Qudan won Japan's highest literary award after using a chatbot to write a portion of her book.

"Using a style that evokes Van Gogh's vibrant and tumultuous brush strokes, the painting emphasizes the turbulent and revolutionary nature of technological progress." (Colin Norton)

As generative AI's potential to shift the dynamics of higher education and writing grows, only one-in-five provosts around the country say they have published a policy governing the use of AI. In-class exams and spoken word assignments are all possible avenues to address increasing chatbot use, but questions remain about whether to dam its inevitable surge or open the floodgates.

"This is a moment of experimentation," said Tulane Provost Robin Forman. "We're trying to learn what works best and what doesn't." In addition to establishing committees for AI in education and AI in research, Forman has encouraged faculty to play around with chatbots while doing so himself.

His goal, he said, is to find the right balance between teaching students to use generative AI while maintaining the core values of a liberal education, such as developing critical thinking skills.

“They will be graduating into a world where in almost every industry, that will be either a requirement or an expectation, or at least an advantage,” Forman said.

Learning the ropes

William Bai had read many of Isaacson’s books since high school. For him, taking the class was a no-brainer.

In his final paper, he used ChatGPT to build an outline, then turned to Gemini to write in-depth summaries of each section.

“I thought that Gemini was better at explaining things more clearly,” Bai said. “It was also able to give citations for everything that I was mentioning.”

Bai is set on attending medical school in the future but felt it was essential for him to become familiar with the technology.

“If you’re not at the table, you’re on the menu,” he said, reflecting an attitude that has fueled his hometown of Silicon Valley. “You have to be part of the people who are driving the development of AI, especially the integration of AI into medicine.”

Bai wants to continue learning about how AI can replace the roles of physicians, but also where it can help automate some of the grunt work like processing medical records.

Meanwhile, sophomore Keona Patel used the opportunity to criticize existing LLMs.
“I think it’s cool that [Isaacson is] giving us free rein to use AI,” she said. But she was quick to point out what she believed as its potential pitfalls. LLMs are typically trained on a wide range of data, much of which contains historical biases. As AI becomes more personalized, she believes chatbots can harm marginalized groups by replicating the same biases they are trained on.

“Not understanding the range of humanity and how it exists can make it exploitative or not make it the most efficient tool for certain people,” Patel said.

Top computer scientists’ attempts at addressing this pitfall have so far proved unsuccessful. When Google launched its image-generation AI tool in February, many users reported bizarre depictions of the U.S. founding fathers or Nazi soldiers as people of color, and Google faced backlash for an overcorrection of bias.

“It was, I believe, well-intentioned,” said Forman, “but it just shows how hard the problem is.”

For her final paper, Patel will use Google's NotebookLM – a relatively obscure AI tool that allows users to input sources manually before asking the chatbot questions. She plans on launching an educational technology company one day and thinks the project will aid her pursuit.

"I'd love to do something the way that Khan Academy is breaking into creating accessible access to education across the world," she said.

Patel was in the crowd when Sal Khan, the founder of Khan Academy and New Orleans native discussed AI with Isaacson during the New Orleans Book Festival at Tulane University in March.

Last year, Khan Academy launched Khanmigo, an AI-powered educational tool built upon ChatGPT designed as a personal tutor for K-12 students. In McAlister Auditorium, Khan showed how Khanmigo could guide students through math problems, papers and book reports, even posing as literary characters like Jay Gatsby with whom students could chat.

Both Forman and Khan recognize the high potential for generative AI to provide students with real-time feedback. Instead of waiting for a professor to grade their paper or practice problems, students could engage in dialogue with chatbots.

"Imagine," Khan said, "if the university had the resources, so that every paper you wrote, you were assigned a grad student that just hung out with you and was just there for you while you're writing the paper."

He also said if students are required to write some papers through a program similar to Khanmigo, it may reduce cheating.

"If you submit it through the AI, the AI is going to say, oh, yeah, here's the paper," Khan said. "And by the way, we worked on it together for four hours. Yeah, this is if you want, here's a whole transcript of us working together on it. Here's a summary."

There could even be a database that gives an entire history of a student's high school or college work done with an AI, he said, used for future admissions or hiring processes.

Patel was skeptical. "Instead of submitting a resume or an application to a university, you'd submit your database and how that summarizes what this person is capable of," she said. "If you don't take into account systemic disadvantages, then it's going to be very clearly skewed towards people."

Beyond personalized learning, Khan also discussed the potential to free up educators' time. Khan believes AI could address teacher shortages by automating tasks like grading and lesson

planning, allowing for increased teacher-student interaction. In higher education, this may translate to professors dedicating more energy to research.

“If we can automate the things that can be automated to free up people’s time, to better support the work of the university, I think that’s a win-win,” said Forman.

Eight million subscribers later, Khan is still making educational videos. He finds chatbots useful in clarifying certain edge cases for students.

“I can find 50 articles on a topic,” he said, “but none of them answer my question.”

He sometimes enters into a Socratic dialogue with Khanmigo that helps him zero in on concepts much quicker, like the difference between a homogenous mixture and a solution for a high school biology lesson.

Back in Herbert Hall, Turing’s question “Can machines think?” morphed into a new one. Will machines replace human thinking or enhance it?

Just the beginning

“Every generation gets a new technology,” Isaacson said in his office, pointing to his father’s slide ruler, then to his Macintosh, Apple’s first personal computer.

The printing press and later the internet allowed for the widespread dissemination of information. Among numerous societal impacts, this decentralization coupled with less grunt work has leveled the playing field between individuals and larger institutions, allowing culture, research and innovation to flourish.

However, the recent rise of certain technologies, including what’s in most Americans’ pockets, is seen by some as a direct detriment to attention spans, public discourse and mental health. Generative AI may take both aspects a step further. Today, Martin Luther’s “95 Theses” is not only accessible in seconds, it can also be summarized in seconds, then turned into rap lyrics and spewed out to sound like Drake.

“The overall composition could suggest the complex and multifaceted nature of AI progress, which, much like the layers and dimensions in cubist art, builds upon itself in a non-linear fashion.” (Colin Norton)

A former math teacher who wields dual Ivy League degrees in the subject, Forman remembers when the calculator first appeared in classrooms 40 years ago, allowing teachers to write more complex problems for students.

“We could go more deeply because we weren’t constrained by the human ability to do arithmetic,” he said.

Chatbots can be used in a similar vein to write papers, rescuing students from the drudgery of grammar and endless web searching. While writing his final paper, senior Connor Hogan said he copied and pasted an outline created from ChatGPT into another chatbot, Anthropic’s Claude AI. It wrote 1,600 words based on the outline. From there, Hogan essentially “injected steroids” into certain sections, such as asking it for an additional 200 words about the future of AI in the workforce or providing a background on the first computer programmer, Ada Lovelace.

The essay was long enough, but he was not satisfied.

“While you’re writing, you’re thinking about the argument that you’re trying to convince the reader of, and [keeping] them engaged.” But similar to how a bodybuilder looks after years of injecting steroids, Hogan felt the strategy yielded more filler than substance. “It’s like show-muscles,” he said. “The machine is just processing your request, pumping some more words.”

So he went back to the outline and used the chatbot as a co-pilot to guide him through an explanation of each decade of AI development, shifting his attention to the way he structured each successive prompt.

“[It] was just so impressive at putting what looks like unstructured thoughts into something that’s really organized and coherent,” he said.

The value of calculators in the classroom is still debated, and though not a direct comparison to generative AI, Forman believes it may provide a cautionary tale. “I talk to people all the time who haven’t multiplied or divided any numbers in years … if you’re getting to rely on a tool, you’ve lost the ability to do that work yourself.”

As Hogan and others found out, chatbots are not close to writing a coherent, well-structured paper. Using a calculator requires at least knowing when and how to add, divide, subtract or multiply; to use ChatGPT to write a paper, “one must know what a good paper looks like,” said Forman.

Chatbots also fabricate or misattribute sources. One student caught it citing a fake Harvard Business Review article, a catch presumably worthy of extra credit.

When late April came, and the class was asked whether or not they learned more about the evolution of AI using the chatbot over traditional methods, only a few hands raised. That doubled when asked if it was better at helping develop useful techniques for writing a paper. Though the value of knowledge versus skill depends on who’s asked, no one could dispute the diversity of papers turned in.

A portion of the class used chatbots to explore areas they were most interested in, diving into the role of women in AI or more technical aspects like transformer architecture. Others chose creative routes, experimenting with poetry, framing it as a Western novel or cosplaying different figures in the digital revolution, like Steve Jobs or the Unabomber. One student wrote the essay as if it were ChatGPT telling a bedtime story to a robot child 3,000 years in the future; another duo collaborated to write an SNL skit.

“At first it was honestly really bad. It wasn’t funny at all, super dry humor,” said Ellianna Bryan, a senior studying marketing. Then Bryan and Lucie Stern, another senior, prompted the chatbot to assign famous cast members to major historical figures; for example, Keenan

Thompson played Alan Turing. After countless rewrites, the script emerged as almost Lorne Michaels-worthy.

“They would bring in interviewers from each point in history and ask them what the state of the digital technology world looks like.” Bryan said, “They were just bickering back and forth the entire time … it was really funny.”

Isaacson plans to create a database of his students’ work to look back on for future research. In the SNL skit, when cast members were asked whether or not AI would render human workers obsolete, the chatbot generated the following: “The group falls silent, pondering the implications.”

As LLMs continue to train on higher degrees of processing power and scour the internet for more data, they’ll require less input and oversight from the user. Among countless existential questions, whether or not they will buttress or erode the pillars of liberal education will unfold in the same fashion as Isaacson’s paper: like an experiment.

“Now we get to play with it,” said Isaacson. “Because that’s the core of this question with AI. Will it be our partner or will it try to replace us?”