



STAR TREK

This Month in History



On September 8, 1966, a science-fiction television show premiered on NBC.

It lasted just three seasons.

And yet, sixty years later, we are still building things that look suspiciously like they came from it.

Welcome to Star Trek.

When Gene Roddenberry first pitched the idea, he reportedly described it as “Wagon Train to the stars.” The result was something much more ambitious: a television series about a starship travelling through space, encountering new worlds, and imagining what technology might look like in the future.

The original series ran from 1966 to 1969. It was eventually cancelled, but the ideas it introduced had a rather different fate.

Take the communicator.

Captain Kirk could flip open a small handheld device and instantly talk to someone aboard the Enterprise. Years later, Martin Cooper, the Motorola engineer who led the development of the first handheld cellular phone, credited the Star Trek communicator as one of the inspirations for his vision of truly personal mobile communication.

The first phone he demonstrated in 1973, however, looked nothing like Kirk's sleek communicator. The Motorola DynaTAC was famously large and brick-shaped.

The closer resemblance came later.

Motorola's StarTAC, released in 1996, was a compact clamshell phone whose design was heavily associated with the Star Trek communicator. Suddenly, that little piece of science fiction didn't look quite so fictional anymore.

And the communicator wasn't the only example.

The tricorder was another idea that engineers took seriously.

In Star Trek, a tricorder was a portable device capable of sensing, collecting and analysing information about the environment or a person's health. In 2012, the Qualcomm Tricorder XPRIZE challenged teams to build something inspired by exactly this idea: a portable device that could monitor vital signs and diagnose multiple health conditions.

In 2017, Final Frontier Medical Devices won the competition's top prize with DxtER, an AI-powered system combining non-invasive sensors with software to assess a range of health conditions.

It wasn't a Star Trek tricorder.

But it was also no longer just a Star Trek idea.

And perhaps that is where the show's most interesting legacy lies.

Star Trek didn't invent the touchscreen. It didn't invent voice interfaces. It didn't invent wearable computing or human-machine interaction.

What it did was imagine what these technologies might feel like to use.

Talk naturally to the computer.

Carry your communication device with you.

Interact with information wherever you are.

Make complicated technology feel intuitive.

That distinction matters.

Because engineering isn't only about asking, Can we build this?

Sometimes, it starts with asking, What if we could?

A generation of engineers, designers and researchers grew up seeing machines that communicated naturally with humans, adapted to their needs, and extended what humans could do. Some of those ideas eventually became design targets rather than fantasy.

Maybe Star Trek didn't actually predict the future.

Maybe it did something more useful.

It gave people a picture of what they wanted the future to feel like.

And sixty years after that first episode aired, we are still chasing parts of that vision.

Star Trek didn't give us the future.

It gave engineers permission to build it.

Space: the final frontier. Turns out, the frontier was also a design document.

Tosin.