

Biased bots: Making artificial jerks?



DIGITAL FUTURES: Human-centered new technology

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Apr 23, 2017 · 2 min read



One of the major themes at this year's SXSW Interactive conference was, not surprisingly, artificial intelligence, with a particular focus on one of the areas where it manifests the most these days: Chatbots, or colloquially, bots. Artificially intelligent virtual robots (hence the term 'bots') are entities which can be programmed to provide simple services, for example as virtual assistants or in helpdesks — and supplement or even replace human workers.

'Siri', Apple's virtual iPhone assistant, is probably the most wellknown bot, but has

lately been joined by Amazon's 'Alexa' and Google's 'Home', as well as lots of other unnamed colleagues from around the world.

Among the AI-topics discussed at SXSW — apart from technical elements and how far current technology can be pushed at this point in time — a range of interesting ethical questions emerged. For example the question of whether creating bots in the image of humans (when possible) is ideal, or if it is actually more desirable to keep them distinctly machine-like. The success criteria of companies such as Apple, Google and Amazon is generally that supreme artificial intelligence is reached by making the bots as human-like as possible. Creating human sentience is the utopic ideal. But do we really want that?

Probably not. Why not, you ask? Well, apart from the classic dystopic scepticism generated by this ideal (inevitably leading to the question: When will the bots turn into terminators and kill us all?), this interesting point was raised: In the short term, the risk is not that we will create killer robots, but rather that we — by creating bots in our image — transfer and thus amplify negative human characteristics such as prejudice, bad habits, biases and political attitudes - just to mention a few — because we are unable to look beyond our own subjectivity when coding these artificially intelligent beings. Do we wish for our bots to take the same political position as that of their creators? Most people would probably agree that that is not the best idea. Instead, the ideal should be to create bots that are distinctly machine-like, so that even as they become increasingly more advanced and skilled, they never let us forget that the bots are, in fact, artificial.

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