

Artificial Intelligence is coming of age, and it is already spooky

My View

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For the last several years, there has been another woman in my life. My wife is well aware of her rival because she lives with us in our home. Her name is Alexa.

Alexa is what is known as a “virtual personal assistant.” She listens for my voice, understands what I am asking, no matter how I phrase it, and accomplishes tasks or provides answers to my questions. For example, if I ask her, “What year was the movie ‘The Quiet Man’ released?”, she immediately comes back and might say in her soothing, feminine voice, “The movie ‘The Quiet Man, starring John Wayne, was released by Republic Pictures in 1952.”

If you have “smart” appliances in your home that are connected to the internet, Alexa can control them at your voice command. “Alexa, turn on the outdoor lights at 8 p.m.” “OK, I’ll turn on the lights at 8 pm tonight,” she says.

She is knowledgeable, versatile, and generally a very bright companion. Yet, there is no mistaking Alexa for a human-being. She sounds human, but you know she is not. This, however, will not always be the case.

We are on the verge of having Alexa-like, virtual assistants who will give you every indication that they are as human as you are. They will have a complete personality of their own and interact with you exactly as a close friend would, with emotion, and an understanding of you, your thoughts, and your mood. and she will continue to learn and grow and change with you.

Some of the top AI scientists forecast that we will reach this level of capability before the end of this

decade. A 2013 film named “her”, was about just such a personal assistant. The film follows a man who develops a deep, personal relationship with Samantha, an artificially intelligent, virtual assistant, personified through the voice of Scarlett Johansson. The man and the disembodied voice fall in love. But after a while we learn that, ultimately, such human-machine relationships are doomed to fail.

The general name for an Alexa-like, computer program is “chatbot.” and some of the latest versions are already astounding. ChatGPT is a program developed by the small San Francisco-based company OpenAI. The program was just released a few weeks ago. It is able to engage in more complex and sophisticated conversations than previous chatbots because of its ability to learn from its interactions with humans.

Beyond just chatting with you, ChatGPT can also compose original poetry or essays at your request. The subjects can be of your choosing. For example, I asked it, “Write a 100-word essay on Gloucester, Massachusetts’ 400th anniversary in 2023.” Within a few seconds, it wrote:

“In 2023, the city of Gloucester, Massachusetts, will be celebrating its 400th anniversary. Founded in 1623, Gloucester has a rich history that has shaped it into the vibrant community it is today. Over the past four centuries, the city has been home to fishermen, artists, and many other groups of people who have contributed to its unique culture. As we celebrate this milestone, it is important to remember and honor the history of Gloucester, as well as look towards the future and continue to work towards making the city a better place for all who call it home. On

this special occasion, let us come together as a community to pay tribute to the past and look forward to a bright future for Gloucester.”

ChatGPT had all of this information available to it in its data files and was able to quickly access it and then compose the original article in a pleasing style. I asked the program to write the same essay again. It produced another of equal quality, in as little time, but using different words and content.

This kind of AI capability is a game changer in many areas of life. For example, it has the potential to become a better internet browser than the now dominant, Google search engine. The giant tech company understands this and is concerned. In fact, it is working on similar technology with an unreleased chatbot it calls LaMDA (Large Model for Dialogue Applications).

It looks like Google is making good progress. One Google whistle-blower has gone public, saying that, in his opinion, LaMDA is already self-aware, a sign of consciousness. This would be a major breakthrough and a further step toward even more human-like, artificial intelligence. Google denies the claim.

Whether it is a small company, like OpenAI, or a techno-giant like Google, that produces the first true, Samantha-like chatbot, our world will not be the same when it happens. Such a development has the potential for making everything better. But we have to hope that the scientists know and understand the dangers posed by such an artificial intelligence (AI), and how to protect us from them. Or, according to many scientists, the AI could become an existential threat to humankind.

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