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Sign of the Sexist Apocalypse

The United Nations finds that Siri and Alexa are tools of male oppression.

By The Editorial Board

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Amazon's Alexa personal assistant. PHOTO: ELIJAH NOUVELAGE/REUTERS

Perhaps you've read that robots will eventually rule over humanity, but in the meantime the United Nations has discovered a more pressing digital catastrophe. It seems Siri, the Apple voice assistant, is a tool of the patriarchy.

And here we thought she, it, whatever was merely an artificial-intelligence tool to make modern life easier to navigate. But this isn't the first time we've had our

identity-politics consciousness raised.

The revelation about this digital plot for male dominance comes in a 146-page report from the U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in cooperation with the German government and the EQUALS Skills Coalition, a partnership of governments, businesses and nonprofits.

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The authors note with alarm that “most leading voice assistants are exclusively female or female by default, both in name and in sound of voice.” This includes Siri, Amazon’s Alexa, and Microsoft’s Cortana. The report says that these voices send “a signal that women are obliging, docile, eager-to-please helpers, available at the touch of a button or with a blunt voice command like ‘hey’ or ‘OK.’” Read on, they’re rolling.

If you tell Cortana she’s hot, the report frets, she’ll quip that “beauty is in the photoreceptors of the beholder.” Digital assistants “greet verbal abuse with catch-me-if-you-can flirtation” and “give deflecting, lacklustre, or apologetic responses to verbal sexual harassment,” the report says. This response fails “to encourage or model, let alone insist on, healthy communications about sex or sexual consent.”

The report identifies still more signs of digital oppression: “The assistant holds no power of agency beyond what the commander asks of it. It honours commands and responds to queries regardless of their tone or hostility.” This reinforces “gender biases that women are subservient and tolerant of poor treatment.”

All of this is apparently a symptom of a lack of women in tech jobs. The U.N. wants countries to redress this with a combination of compulsory tech education for women, gender quotas in tech industries, and (of course) government funding. The tech firms behind these voice assistants are some of the most politically correct places on the planet, so we confess some amusement to see them called out as sexist. Perhaps Sheryl Sandberg will lean-in to make Facebook’s voice

assistant male.

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