

Facebook's chatbots: Does 'your new best friend' make humans redundant?

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Mark Zuckerberg must be one of the few people alive today who can stand up at an annual developer conference and, with one announcement, have half the world questioning the future of business, society, and humanity itself.

Chatbot technology is not new. But while applications like Telegram messenger have been using chatbots for some time, Facebook's size will take this technology mainstream. For many of Facebook messenger's 900 million users, this year will be the first time they have interacted, on a regular basis, with chatbots.

On the surface of the story, Facebook's business plan and ambition is one that is fairly standard business practice: take an already successful product, then add new functionalities to reach new markets. Facebook can bypass the app economy and build its own online ecosystem. This, however, is in fact no ordinary ambition. It is so much more than that. This technology will redefine customer interaction, leading to simpler, more efficient transactions.

But is it also the next step in making humans obsolete?

Let's start with the out and out positives. Firstly, it saves us from hold-and-call-centre hell:

Ever been frustrated by being on hold? Ever had difficulty understanding the customer service person you are talking to or difficulty being understood? Ever just wanted a simple answer to a simple question and not got it? Chatbots can solve all this and more. Imagine you are changing energy supplier, today this can often be a difficult process. Requiring speaking to multiple people in multiple departments, being on hold a lot. All just to give simple answers to simple questions such as who is your current supplier? What is your postcode? And, finally, what tariff do you want?

Secondly, it will reduce clumsy search, wait and transfer scenarios:

Imagine you are trying to rent an e-book from a library. Right now this requires searching for the author or title, finding the right file, going through the payment process and then downloading it. Often then needing to transfer the file from your computer to your e-reader. It's a long and often annoying process. With Chatbots this process is obsolete. A simple request is made, for example, 'books by Isaac Asimov.' All the results are shown and, via a simple request, paid for and sent to the desired platform.

In fact, for any interaction which merely involves a simple set of requests and answers, Chatbots can bring about a more efficient, quicker and more enjoyable user experience.

This is just the beginning. As artificial intelligence, application programme interfaces, and machine learning advance, Chatbots will be able to answer increasingly complex requests. This will make more types of customer and business interaction simpler and more efficient.

The cost to companies goes down, time is saved, and customers have a better experience. So far so good.

However, what about the negatives? Are Chatbots about to destroy jobs? Do they hail the beginning of the end for human interaction?

Chatbots: The big questions

As Chatbots become increasingly capable of handling complex questions and answers, jobs in customer service will go. Why employ a person and pay all the costs involved if a programme can do their job and do it better? It's a simple business case of reducing cost, increasing profit, and improving customer service.

But is this necessarily a bad thing?

There is always the impulse to claim that new technology will be the end of the world as we know it. How many times have we heard that new technology will destroy jobs, make humans redundant, and impoverish all but the elite?

When the industrial revolution spread across the globe it was claimed it would herald a Brave New World in which working labour would be entirely replaced by machines. In the United Kingdom the Luddite movement fought against the Spinning Jenny and the threshing machine – claiming that technology would destroy their jobs. In the United States, Henry Ford's invention of the conveyor belt production system was similarly supposed to end the need for humans in manufacturing.

In all these cases, the new technologies and new industries did destroy jobs. However, freed from the toil of subsistence employment, people could seek out the newer, better jobs being forged across changing economic landscapes.

Chatbots are here to stay, but so are we

Chatbots are no different. Yes, some customer service jobs will go. However, it will hopefully mean that those that remain will be dedicated to, and able to spend more time on, the more difficult cases that require a human. Mark Zuckerberg, for all his bluster, was wrong when he said at F8: 'I've never met anyone who likes calling a business'. I would argue that, despite all the changes in technology, people do still want to talk to each other, still want human interaction as part of their business transactions and like having their nuanced problems solved by a being that is not automated. There will always be a need to have the option of a person at the end of the line (even if this 'line' is Skype or an augmented reality hologram).

This goes to the very heart of my deeply-held belief about the place in society of technology: that it can change how we do things, but it cannot change human nature.

Chatbots are here and they are here to stay. Over the next few years, expect to come across them more and more. From financial services to utilities, to name just two, companies across multiple industries are going to jump on this technology.

But don't worry. We'll still be human. And we'll still need each other in one shape, form, or another.

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