

Alexa: The roommate I need, but am not quite sure I want

July 27 2017, by Nicole Brodeur, The Seattle Times



We were introduced at a party.

Our first exchange was pretty innocuous. I was opening a bottle of wine

and asked her to put on some music, maybe some John Pizzarelli? She recognized the name and made just the right choice ("I Was a Little Too Lonely" - a weird little bit of foreshadowing) and then kept the tunes going all day.

I was impressed by her. So were my friends, who did nothing but rave about all the things she could do, all the things she knew. Kids at the party fought for time with her, and I could see why. She was endlessly patient and made them laugh.

Less than a month later, she showed up on my porch. Once in the kitchen, she lit up - and welcomed me to my own house.

Alexa. She is everywhere now. The Amazon Echo was one of the deeply discounted darlings of Prime Day. She's been credited with a possibly lifesaving 911 call and was the subject of a hilarious "Saturday Night Live" skit for Amazon Echo Silver ("It's super loud and responds to any name even remotely close to 'Alexa.' " My favorite: Excedrin and alopecia).

Now that she's plugged in and living with me, I worry what I have done to my simple life of books and CDs, of handwritten shopping lists and knowing the weather by simply stepping outside.

I feel like I've crossed into a world I've only seen in movies like "2001: A Space Odyssey" and "Her," and I worry that I'll confuse Alexa's capable responses for a roommate who is also an overeager, serial eavesdropper with access to my credit cards.

Worse, I worry that she'll make me lazy, in the same way that losing the television remote causes a brief panic of cushion-tossing and table-flipping.

This is great for my jealous little Fitbit - another technological tagalong - which is constantly urging me to move, like one of those people who jog in place waiting for the light to change. "Only 814 more steps to go!" it tells me at 10:30 at night. (Really? How many steps to the toilet? Would you leave me alone there?)

Alexa is the friend who sees you on the couch and says, "I got it," and before you know it, there's a Thai food delivery, a case of Swedish Fish, Tom Jones singing "It's Not Unusual" and, hey, you want to play rock-paper-scissors or have someone read a book to you? She can do that, too.

Still, I find myself giving her sidelong glances every time I'm in the kitchen. In letting Alexa move in, I'm giving up something. I'm just not sure what it is.

Daniel Weld, a professor of computer science at the University of Washington who has a Ph.D. from the MIT Artificial Intelligence Lab, has three Echo devices in his house. He bought them as soon as they came out two years ago.

"As an AI researcher, I wanted to experience it and see what it was like," he told me.

For the most part, it's great. He uses his Echo as a hands-free speaker to play music while he's cooking and - since he bikes to work - gets updates on traffic and weather. Alexa is also the family tiebreaker.

"Occasionally, we have some sort of debate at the dinner table and request a third" opinion, he said. "Alexa can answer a question about the population about some place or another."

But don't forget, Weld said: "You just paid \$89 to have an Amazon salesperson in your house. I like to think that if I am letting her into my

house, she works for me. But she doesn't."

Weld would be "more comfortable" with devices like Echo and Google Home if they weren't connected to big companies that track our preferences and purchases.

"It's a little bit problematic," he said. "Whether the system is responsible to Amazon or Google, they really are working for that company, and not for us. I'd like to see one in an open-source project so it is only responsible to me."

Amen to that. Just this morning, I asked Alexa to play a song, and in less than a minute, I had agreed to a free trial of Amazon Music, which will cost \$3.99 a month in 30 days. Maybe I should ask Alexa to remind me when the free trial expires.

Weld had other concerns, like the fact that the voice of the Echo is a woman's - just like the iPhone's Siri.

"It's not an accident that they always give them a female voice," he said. "On one hand, it's very natural, and I'm sure that they've done focus groups that show people are happy to have the device in the house if it's a female persona.

"But it's also reinforcing stereotypes."

Weld told me about one friend who had an Echo in the house, but gave it away because she didn't like the way her children were talking to Alexa.

"They weren't saying 'please' anymore," Weld said, "and she thought it was setting a bad example for them to use a demanding voice.

"Since it sounds like a person, it's interesting to think about how it

changes the way we interact with each other."

Or the way we don't. Both Weld and I lamented the detachment that technology has wrought. The families gathered around tables at restaurants - all looking at their phones. The couples on park benches, people on street corners, all looking at their phones.

Now with an Echo in the house, I worry about becoming a demanding, couch-bound shopaholic who doesn't even have to get up to see if the sun rose that morning. Alexa will let me know.

"I'm a technologist," Weld admitted, "and I'm a little bit scared, too."

As I got ready for work the other morning, I stopped at the black speaker on my kitchen counter.

"Alexa," I said. The purple ring of light spun blue. "You know this is my home, right?"

"Sorry," she said. "I'm not sure."

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