

CES tech show stuffed with gadgets we don't need - or do we?

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LG's David Vander Waal introduces the InstaView ThinQ smart refrigerator during a news conference at CES International, Monday, Jan. 8, 2018, in Las Vegas. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

Today's vision of a smart home has more to do with what's technologically possible than what people really need.

Thus the endless parade of internet-connected wine openers, water

bottles, meat thermometers and refrigerators, and a dearth of automation that would clean and fold our laundry, pick up things around the house or assist aging people as their physical strength wanes.

Not that some tinkerers aren't trying to come up with life-changing tools. The annual CES gadget show, which opened in Las Vegas on Tuesday, is a showcase of the latest innovations from big corporations and tiny startups. Some of these inventions could soon be useful to consumers. Others look outlandishly impractical—or maybe it's too soon to tell.

THE INTERNET OF WHAT?

Want to book an Uber ride from your fridge? Samsung has you covered with one of its latest refrigerator models unveiled in Vegas. Or if you're looking for a water bottle that "helps celebrate when you've met your hydration goals," the internet-connected Hidrate Spark 2.0 has arrived.

You can command a Whirlpool microwave to switch settings with your voice, but per regulations, you still have to walk over to push the button to start it (and of course put food in and out). A meat thermometer made by Apption Labs will send a notification to your phone app when your steak is fully barbecued.

It's unlikely that anyone but the most extreme wine connoisseur will need to track wine-preserving argon gas levels in a half-finished bottle of pinot noir. But a maker of bottle-opening gadgetry, Coravin, lets you do just that. The device needles wine out of a bottle without pulling the cork. What's new is connectivity and an app, so you're alerted when the gadget needs cleaning or a new battery.



Mariana Marcaletti laughs as she tries on a Spartan boxer, an underwear that blocks radiation from wireless devices, during CES Unveiled at CES International Sunday, Jan. 7, 2018, in Las Vegas. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

All this reflects a cottage industry striving to imbue every last household appliance or wearable item with connectivity. But do we really need it?

NEVER MIND THE NAYSAYERS

What one person considers a silly idea is another person's breakthrough, and many innovations displayed at CES could find long-term commercial success among niche audiences even if they aren't widely adopted, said technology analyst Tom Coughlin, president of Coughlin Associates.

"Some stuff is before it's time. Some stuff is partially thought through,"

Coughlin said. But you never know, he said, because "sometimes people don't know what they need until they see it."

At CES, Coughlin said, "you see the hopes and dreams, the fantasies, both mad and sublime and clever things that people can think of doing."

THE DUTCH LESSON

In the Netherlands, startup entrepreneurs often look mockingly back to a late-1990s video that asked random people in Amsterdam if they ever wanted a mobile phone, said Stefan Witkamp, co-founder of [smart home](#) startup Athom B.V.



Moodo's smart fragrance box is displayed during CES Unveiled at CES International Sunday, Jan. 7, 2018, in Las Vegas. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

"Now it's unthinkable not to have your smartphone," said Witkamp, whose company's Homey product links various connected devices to a single system. Similar skepticism now affects smart devices, he said.

"People think, why do I need to control my music through my smartphone? Why do I need to manage and monitor my home remotely or automatically? But it could very well be that in five years, we'll be thinking: 'Why would we ever not want to?'"

BUT WHERE'S MY ROBOT?

The reality is that it's a lot easier to connect an appliance to the internet than it is to build "Rosie," the robotic maid that TV cartoon show "The Jetsons" launched into the world's imagination a half-century ago.

Sure, robotic vacuums are already cleaning carpets and kitchen floors around the world, but the level of artificial intelligence and physical precision it takes to do housework like a human is still a far-off dream for robot-makers. Instead, many of the robots coming on the consumer market are either toys or designed to be a more personality-driven version of a talking speaker.

But it's not for lack of trying.



An attendee takes pictures of the new Samsung Family Hub smart refrigerator during a news conference at CES International, Monday, Jan. 8, 2018, in Las Vegas. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

DUELING LAUNDRY-FOLDERS

"It took us 13 years to reach this point," said Shin Sakane, founder and CEO of Tokyo-based Seven Dreamers Laboratories.

His "Laundroid" clothes-folder—and the rival FoldiMate also on display at CES—are feats of engineering that also underscore the limits of current technology. Sakane's bureau-sized machine is powered by hidden robotic arms and computer vision that can distinguish between different types of clothing.

"It's a soft material," Sakane said, clutching a white towel. "It could be a

T-shirt. It's hard to distinguish."

Priced at \$16,000, the machine can take 30 items per cycle, though it's still not terribly efficient. It takes 10 or more minutes to fold a shirt—making each cycle a 6-hour project.

Rival FoldiMate claims to be faster, but the company came to the show for the second-year running without a functioning prototype. As founder and CEO Gal Rosov demonstrated putting shirts and towels into a top rack where they were sucked into the machine, a bottom drawer opened with pre-folded items inside. To repeat the display, he opened a middle panel where crumpled items hadn't been folded at all.

Rosov said the machine on display was just a concept model and the company hopes to start "early shipping" at the end of 2019.

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