

Voice assistants promise a light-fingered future

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Samsung's flagship S8 smartphone incorporates its virtual assistant Bixby, which competes in a crowded field that includes Apple's Siri, Google Assistant and Amazon Alexa.

Tomorrow's digital interface may be even more revolutionary than the pinching, tapping and scrolling heralded by the smartphone: voice commands promise to unify and tame our digital lives.

Tiny speakers visible at every stand at Berlin's IFA electronics fair, most of them endowed with a feminine voice, are the ears and mouths of the new artificial intelligences.

Things haven't quite reached the fever pitch of 2013's "Her", Spike Jonze's film in which Joaquin Phoenix falls in love with an operating system voiced by Scarlett Johansson.

But industry experts and salespeople paint a glowing picture of a future home in which an artificial intelligence (AI)-powered butler will cater to consumers' every need via networked appliances.

"This technology is about to play a huge role in our lives. The main question for manufacturers is what technical solution will make it as intuitive as possible," said Martin Boerner, vice-president of Germany's [information technology industry](#) federation Bitkom.

Industry giants like Google, Amazon, Samsung and Microsoft are battling it out to produce the most responsive voice-controlled AIs, aiming to reduce the amount of time we spend tapping buttons or swiping through lists on our smartphones.

Many users check their phones 200 or even 300 times a day, Sony Mobile France chief executive Jean Raoul de Gelis pointed out, meaning that "above all, voice controls free up our hands" for other tasks.

As well as giving our thumbs a break, the new interfaces will, their makers hope, take the load off our brains as well, learning our habits and routines and working out what we want and need from them.

"The ultimate goal is that you are unaware of the technology. Nobody wants to programme the floor cleaner robot's duty schedule for the week. Automation needs to become as tactful and perceptive as a

butler," said Paul Gray of consultancy IHS.

AI has landed

Google and Amazon overshadow IFA despite their absence, with exhibitors of TVs, home appliances or sound systems proudly declaring partnerships with one or the other.

Research firm Gartner expects the connected speaker market to grow to 3.5 billion dollars worldwide by 2021, from 360 million in 2015.

As the objects' design remains perhaps too self-consciously high-tech for many people's kitchens or bedside tables, the smartphone is likely to remain the mouthpiece of the AIs for some time yet.

Google, Amazon's Alexa, Samsung's Bixby, Microsoft's Cortana and Apple's Siri are all jostling for space in consumers' imaginations.

Google has a big advantage with its Android phones in billions of pockets around the world, but a competitor like Amazon could end up on top of the wide-open market for home automation—from kitchen to car, via the thermostat and the front door lock.

Bound together

But building this densely-networked future environment will bring new challenges for technology companies.

They will have to work together more closely to maintain the illusion of effortless for users, most of whom won't be prepared to outfit their entire life with one brand's devices.

At present, buyers have a hard time figuring out which devices are compatible with which others—prompting manufacturers to push for a standard protocol, a universal language that would allow appliances to communicate.

"Some players think this is a winner-takes-all market and a single AI agent will win. Other companies believe a smartphone will include multiple AI agents which are optimised for different tasks," IHS analyst Ian Fogg said.

Samsung has already taken up the banner of compatibility, announcing Wednesday that it would work more closely with the Open Connectivity Foundation, a group that aims to simplify linking up devices.

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