

What will the next 50 years bring in robotics research?

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Would a conscious robot need the same rights as a human being? Could robots one day take over the care of our ageing population? Will robots be our soldiers of the future? When will robots be able to do all the housework?

These are just some of the questions being tackled at the ‘Rights for Robots’ public debate taking place in London this evening.

The speakers are all experts from the ‘Walking with Robots’ network, which is funded by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council.

The network brings together key researchers in intelligent robotics and leading science communicators. Their aim is highlight the ethical implications of robotics research.

A recent study commissioned by the UK Office of Science and Innovation’s Horizon Scanning Centre entitled ‘Utopian dream or rise of the machines?’ looked at future developments in artificial intelligence over the next 20 to 50 years.

The Walking with Robots network is using this study as a starting point to explore the wide range of surrounding issues, including current technological limitations, conscious robots, robot licensing, and safety critical testing.

The speakers at the debate are Professor Owen Holland (University of Essex), Dr Tony Hirst (the Open University), Professor Murray Shanahan (Imperial College London) and Professor Alan Winfield (University of the West of England, Bristol). The discussion will be facilitated by Professor Noel Sharkey from the University of Sheffield.

"Robot technology is accelerating with applications in the home, in the workplace and in the military. It is hard to keep up and we are at a point where the public need to make some informed decisions about our future," says Professor Noel Sharkey.

"Some researchers believe that robots will have consciousness on a timescale of 50+ years while others believe this is a fairytale. The problem is that robots may be required to make decisions that could affect our lives much sooner. While some governments are beginning to draw up ethical guidelines, we need to initiate proper public consultation and informed public debate now."

Source: Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council

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