

Are Google's A.I.-Powered Phone Calls Cool, Creepy, or Both?



The biggest nonromantic tech news of this week came from a new A.I. tool introduced at Google's [annual developer conference](#). The program, known as Duplex, is an automated voice assistant capable of making hair appointments, booking restaurant reservations and conducting other tasks over the phone. It even inserts lifelike pauses and filler words like “um” and “hmm” for extra realism. At no point in the demo were the receptionists on the other end of the calls informed that they were talking to a computer rather than another human.

The onstage demo of Duplex drew lots of oohs and aahs. Admittedly, it was an incredible piece of technological theater — reminiscent of the “one more thing” twists of golden-age Apple events. And it's important to keep in mind that Duplex is just an experiment, and it may never be released publicly in its current form.

But the demo — which amounted to a series of extremely high-tech crank calls — raised a lot of hackles.

Zeynep Tufekci, a professor and writer, called Duplex “horrifying,” and [said that](#) Google's willingness to use A.I. to fool humans — and to brag about its ability to do so on stage at a public event — showed that “Silicon Valley is ethically lost, rudderless and has not learned a thing.”

Matt Haughey, the creator of the internet forum MetaFilter, [tweeted](#), “How Google did that Duplex A.I. voice demo without anyone flagging it internally is beyond me.” The company, he added, “needs a V.P. of gut checks.”

In a statement, a Google representative said: “What we showed at I/O was an early technology demo, and we look forward to incorporating feedback as we develop this into a product.”

Even some A.I. experts were taken aback by the Duplex demo, which showed off a kind of technology that scammers could one day use to make mass robocalls, conduct social engineering hacks and impersonate people on the phone. Google has said that the technology won't be used for telemarketing. The company says it will be used to call businesses using publicly available numbers to gather information like a store's hours. But it doesn't take much imagination to see how this kind of technology could be used for all kinds of questionable or dangerous tasks. And there's an obvious ethical question of whether a robot caller should be required to identify itself as a nonhuman.

Erik Brynjolfsson, a professor at M.I.T. who has written extensively about artificial intelligence, told the [The Washington Post](#) that while Google's Duplex demo was technologically "amazing," it still raised ethical questions.

"I don't think the main goal of A.I. should be to mimic humans," he said.

Defenders of Google's Duplex experiment have pointed out that an automated phone call service could be helpful for people with disabilities, or for freeing people from annoying customer service slogs. ("O.K. Google, cancel my cable subscription.") But Google is now in a precarious position. It wants to keep pushing its A.I. development forward, but it needs to do so in ways that won't scare people at a time when distrust of the tech industry is growing by the day.

Bloomberg [reports](#) that the backlash to Duplex caught Google by surprise. That, to me, is the most disturbing piece of this week's news — that people inside the company thought that a demo of advanced A.I. fooling an unwitting human receptionist would be greeted with universal praise.

I keep thinking of a [Twitter thread](#) posted last November by Kumail Nanjiani, one of the stars of HBO's "Silicon Valley." He noted that while doing research for the show, the show's crew members often visited the offices of tech companies and were struck by how little thought engineers gave to the ethical implications of their products.

"Often we'll see tech that is scary," Mr. Nanjiani wrote. "And we'll bring up our concerns to them. We are realizing that ZERO consideration seems to be given to the ethical implications of tech. They don't even have a pat rehearsed answer. They are shocked at being asked. Which means nobody is asking those questions."