

THE CONVERSATION



In defence of sex machines: why trying to ban sex robots is wrong

September 17, 2015 6.33am BST

Universal Pictures

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“Ban sex robots!” scream the tech headlines, as if they’re heralding the arrival of the latest artificial intelligence threat to humankind since **autonomous killer robots**. The **campaign**, led by academics **Kathleen Richardson** and **Erik Billing**, argues that the development of sex robots should be stopped because it reinforces or reproduces existing inequalities.

Yes, society has enough problems with gender stereotypes, entrenched sexism and sexual objectification. But actual opposition to developing sexual robots that aims for an outright ban? That seems shortsighted, even – pardon the pun – undesirable.

Existing research into sex and robots generally centres on a superficial exploration of human attachment, popularised by films such as *Her* and *Ex Machina*: a male-dominated, male-gaze approach of machine-as-sex-machine, often without consideration of gender parity. Groundbreaking work by David Levy, built on the early research into **teledildonics** – cybersex toys operable through the internet – describes the increasing likelihood of a society that will welcome sex robots. For Levy, sex work is a model that can be mirrored in human-robot relations.

Carving a new narrative

Richardson does not relish this prospect and to an extent I agree with her misgivings; it is a narrative that should be challenged. I absolutely agree that to do so would require, as Richardson **states** in her **recent paper**: “a discussion about the ethics of gender and sex in robotics”. Such a discussion is long overdue. In the gendering of robots, and the sexualised personification of machines, digital sexual identity is too often presumed, but to date little-considered.

The relationship between humans and their artificial counterparts runs right back to the myths of ancient Greece, where sculptor Pygmalion’s statue was brought to life with a kiss. It

is the stuff of legend and of science fiction – part of our written history and a part of our imagined future. The feminist thinker Donna Haraway’s renowned *A Cyborg Manifesto* laid the modern groundwork for seriously considering a post-gendered world where distinction between natural and artificial life is blurred. Written in 1991, it is prescient in terms of thinking about artificial sexuality.

But just as we should avoid importing existing gender and sexual biases into future technology, so we should also be cautious not to import established prudishness. Lack of openness about sex and sexual identities has been a source of great mental and social anguish for many people, even entire societies, for centuries. The politics behind this lack of candour is very damaging.

The campaign seeks to avoid the sexualisation of robots, but at the cost of politicising them, and doing so in a narrow manner. If robots oughtn’t to have artificial sexuality, why should they have a narrow and unreflective morality? It’s one thing to have a conversation and conclude something about the development of technology; it’s another to demand silence before anyone has had the chance to speak.



A ‘gynoid’ customer service robot in female form. Gnsin, CC BY-SA

The scope for sex robots goes far beyond Richardson’s definition of them as “machines in the form of women or children for use as sex objects, substitutes for human partners or prostitutes”. Yes, we impose our beliefs on these machines: we anthropomorphise and we bring our prejudices and assumptions with us. Sex robots have, like much of the technology we use today, been designed by men, for men. Think of the objects we use everyday: smartphones better suited to a man’s larger hands and the pockets of men’s clothes, or pacemakers only suitable for 20% of women.

Machines are what we make them

But robotics also allows us to explore issues without the restrictions of being human. A machine is a blank slate that offers us the chance to reframe our ideas. The internet has already opened up a world where people can explore their sexual identity and politics, and build communities of those who share their views. Aided by technology, society is rethinking sex/gender dualism. Why should a sex robot be binary?

And sex robots could go beyond sex. What about the scope for therapy? Not just personal therapy (after all, companion and care robots are already in use) but also in terms of therapy for those who break the law. Virtual reality has already been trialled in psychology and has been proposed as a way of treating sex offenders. Subject to ethical considerations, sex robots could be a valid way of progressing with this approach.

To campaign against development is shortsighted. Instead of calling for an outright ban, why not use the topic as a base from which to explore new ideas of inclusivity, legality and social change? It is time for new approaches to artificial sexuality, which includes a move away from the machine-as-sex-machine hegemony and all its associated biases.



Pygmalion’s statue is not a robot, but still springs to life to please her creator. Jean-Léon Gérôme/Bridgemen Art Library

Machines are what we make them. At least, for now – if we've lost control of that then we have a whole other set of problems. Fear of a branch of AI that is in its infancy is a reason to shape it, not ban it. A campaign to stop killer robots is one thing, but a campaign against sex robots? Make love, not war.



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