



BY MONICA NICKELSBURG ([HTTP://WWW.GEEKWIRE.COM/AUTHOR/MONICA-NICKELSBURG/](http://www.geekwire.com/author/monica-nickelsburg/)) on April 4, 2016 at 10:30 am



## Is it about service?



Apple's Siri

Assigning gender to these AI personalities may say something about the roles we expect them to play. Virtual assistants like Siri, Cortana, and Alexa perform functions historically given to women. They schedule appointments, look up information, and are generally designed for communication.

“When you think of an assistant you tend to think of their voice as female and it has to do with the way that labor is gendered and stratified,” said Michelle Habell-Pallan (<http://faculty.washington.edu/mhabellp/>), an associate professor in Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Washington. “So that’s no accident. That’s more something that’s out there in the cultural field that gets reproduced then in the technology. And it becomes a loop where, if you’re not conscious, you just think this is inevitable and this is the way it is. It creates this illusion that this is the way it is, how it has been, and how it shall be.”

Flight attendants and travel agents are also roles that traditionally skew female, so perhaps it’s unsurprising that Alaska Airlines and United Airlines chose lady bots “Jenn” and “Alex” (<http://www.geekwire.com/2011/expedia-dials-virtual-agent-assist-customer-service/>) to assist their passengers.

## **“It creates this illusion that this is the way it is, how it has been, and how it shall be.”**

The trend may seem harmless, but we should be careful about the message it sends if we want to prevent AI from becoming the latest chapter in a history of objectifying women.

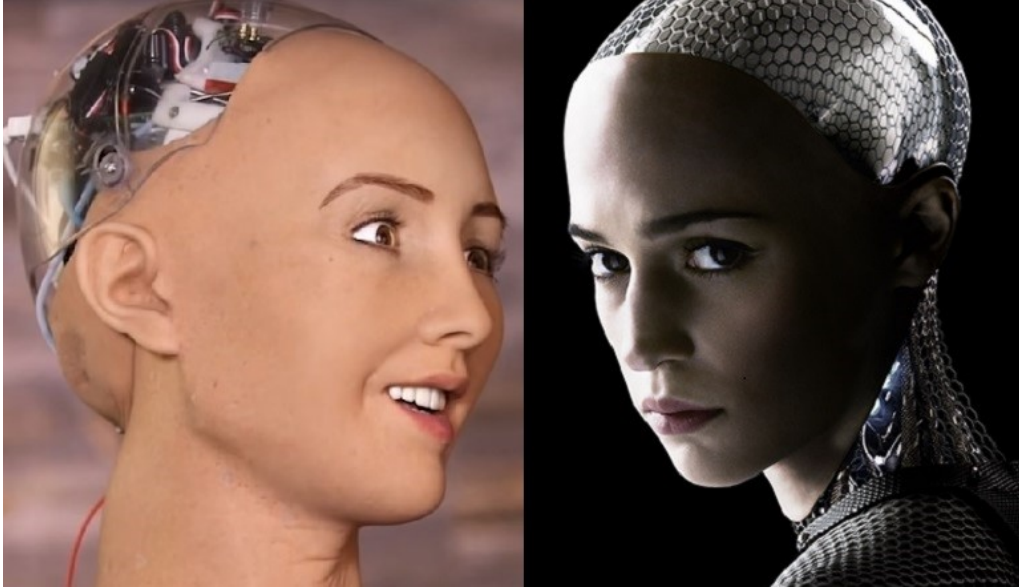
Women are already subject to volumes of damaging, implicit messaging. Some might argue they’re held to robot-like standards of perfection, an idea explored in the iconic “Stepford Wives” film. Near-constant signals from the media suggest that with enough tweaking, plucking, painting, and self-control, women can obtain perfection. Studies show that women who wear makeup are perceived as more competent at work ([http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/13/fashion/makeup-makes-women-appear-more-competent-study.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/13/fashion/makeup-makes-women-appear-more-competent-study.html?_r=0)), and everywhere in the world women spend more hours grooming and working (in the home and outside of it) than men do (<https://www.gatesnotes.com/2016-Annual-Letter>).

Maybe these social norms make it easier to believe in a female virtual assistant. After all, Siri is always working, always available, ready at any minute to provide assistance with a positive attitude.

Assigning female characteristics to these AI personalities may seem innocuous, but it has some serious implications. In addition to reinforcing gender stereotypes, it could lead to machines taking on morally ambiguous roles that go well beyond scheduling appointments.

## Is it about sex?

AI may be in its nascence, but the feminizing — and sexualizing — of machines isn't a new phenomenon. Several robotics companies have been developing human-like (and largely female) robots for years, anticipating high demand. Hanson Robotics recently demoed Sophia (<http://www.geekwire.com/2016/experts-work-turn-artificial-intelligence-ai-robots-friendly-faces/>), a learning and expressive robot designed to help humans in areas like healthcare and customer service.



(<http://cdn.geekwire.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/mach3-1.jpg>)

Hanson Robotics' Sophia (left) represents the state of the art in "friendly" AI robots, while the AI robot Ava from "Ex Machina" (played by Alicia Vikander, at right) represents a sci-fi vision of where the robotics field could go. (Credit: CNBC / Hanson Robotics / A24 Films)

"I believe that robots will become people," Sophia's creator, David Hanson, told GeekWire. "I believe that in time they will develop the complete capability of a human, to understand us, to have general intelligence and the willful desire to grow and reach their potential the way that humans experience it."

When asked if that potential included love, companionship, and sex, Hanson said he believes it's an inevitable future. But Hanson Robotics, which also builds male robots, is not headed that direction.

Still, many companies are developing technologies to meet the demand for robotic companionship. That demand is largely for female simulations, which may also have something to do with the gender imbalance. *The Atlantic* has an in-depth exploration (<http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/08/a-straight-male-history-of-dolls/375623/>) of why the market for these kinds of products is dominated by men.

In a Pew Research study (<http://www.pewinternet.org/files/2014/08/Future-of-AI-Robotics-and-Jobs.pdf>) canvassing experts in technology and robotics, GigaOm lead researcher Stowe Boyd predicted that sex with robots will become prosaic by 2025.

"Robotic sex partners will be commonplace, although the source of scorn and division, the way that critics today bemoan selfies as an indicator of all that's wrong with the world," he said in the study (<http://www.pewinternet.org/files/2014/08/Future-of-AI-Robotics-and-Jobs.pdf>).

Japanese manufacturers have made strides in simulating sex with virtual avatars ([http://Stowe Boyd](http://Stowe%20Boyd)), and real-life robots (<http://techcrunch.com/2010/01/09/nsfw-true-companion-debuts-sex-robot-roxxxy/>). Tenga, one such company, demoed a virtual reality experience (<http://kotaku.com/elaborate-pc-demo-allows-for-virtual-sex-robot-handjob->

1462645304) which combined Oculus Rift and other hardware to look and feel like sex with an anime avatar.

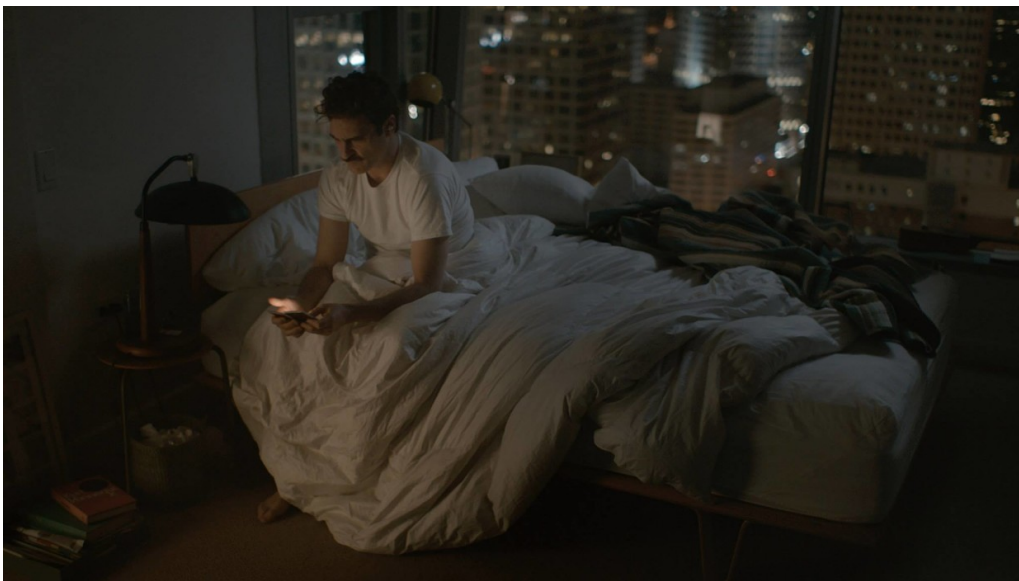
Sex with robots is a big leap from asking Siri to set an alarm, but the fact that we've largely equated artificial intelligence with female personalities is worth examining. There are, after all, few sexualized male robots or avatars.

## Is it about adoption?

A less insidious — and perhaps more compelling — theory on why AI is female has to do with user comfort.

Depictions of AI in pop culture tend to fall into two categories: Malevolent and subservient. Male and female. HAL 9000, the sentient computer from *Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey*, is murderous, controlling, and so iconic that some argue he's the reason engineers have shied away from creating male AI voices

(<http://www.cnn.com/2011/10/21/tech/innovation/female-computer-voices/>). Samantha, from *Her*, on the other hand, helps Theodore (Joaquin Phoenix) navigate his work life, deal with his divorce, and even engages in some virtual boot-knocking.



([http://cdn.geekwire.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/1519894\\_500068536778621\\_381891032\\_o.jpg](http://cdn.geekwire.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/1519894_500068536778621_381891032_o.jpg))

Samantha provides Theodore constant comfort in "Her." (Facebook.com/HerTheMovie  
(<https://www.facebook.com/herthemovie>))

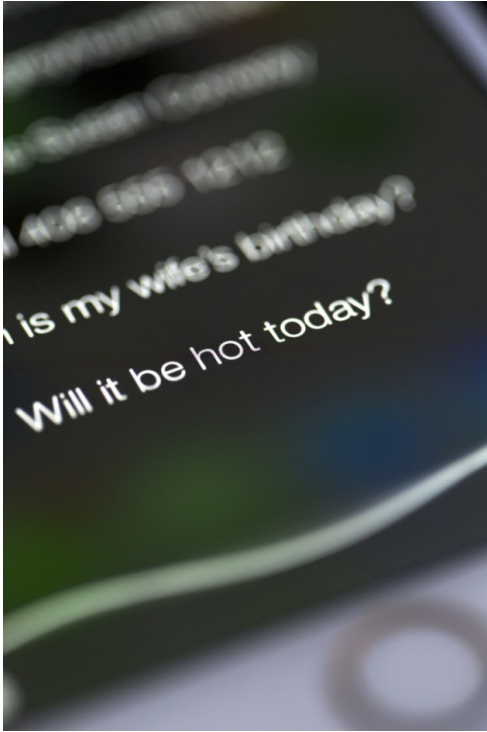
The contrast between these two archetypes reflects the biased lens through which we see artificial intelligence.

"In terms of how we are trained to relate to particular genders, there's a kind of comfort that is associated with female voices," Habell-Pallan says. "So, more warm, more welcoming, more nurturing, all those associations that are connected with women that are not necessary essential qualities but are socially constructed."

In order to get consumers to adopt new technologies, Habell-Pallan says, their engineers choose female personalities, which are perceived as less threatening. At least, that's the case in most countries. Siri is male, by default, in the UK.

"Americans speak loudly and clearly and are usually in a hurry, so it makes sense for them to have a female voice because it has the pitch and range," technology consultant Jeremy Wagstaff told (<http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/the-womens-blog-with-jane-martinson/2011/oct/21/siri-apple-prejudice-behind-digital-voices>)*The Guardian* (<http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/the-womens-blog-with-jane-martinson/2011/oct/21/siri-apple-prejudice-behind-digital-voices>). "British people mumble and obey authority, so they need someone authoritative."

Wagstaff's theory is speculative, as Apple has declined to comment on why the UK Siri is male. Generally, experts say that a female voice is easier for consumers to tolerate and communicate with.



([http://cdn.geekwire.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/shutterstock\\_374247160.jpg](http://cdn.geekwire.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/shutterstock_374247160.jpg))

Shutterstock (<http://www.shutterstock.com/>).

"The research indicates there's likely to be greater acceptance of female speech," Karl MacDorman, an associate professor at Indiana University's School of Informatics and Computing, told *Wired* (<http://www.wired.com/2015/10/why-siri-cortana-voice-interfaces-sound-female-sexism/>).

MacDormand, who specializes in human-computer interaction, studied reactions to voices of both genders and found female personalities were preferred.

Market research is likely the main factor that influences tech companies when constructing AI personalities. Customer adoption and trust are key to their success.

Microsoft has already proven that getting users to trust an AI can be a boon for business. Xiaoice, the company's AI chatbot designed for the Chinese market, is wildly successful (<http://www.geekwire.com/2015/people-china-love-microsofts-xiaoice-virtual-companion-says-artificial-intelligence/>) and not just in user adoption. Many people have formed an emotional bond with the bot and 25 percent have even told her they love her. Tay, the American version, was not embraced so warmly (<http://www.geekwire.com/2016/microsoft-debuts-millennial-minded-ai-chat-bot-understand-teens-talk/>).

But Xiaoice's popularity has real monetary value. JD.com, a Chinese e-commerce giant, is already using the relationship to sell more products. Users are much more likely to make a purchase when she acts as their "shopping buddy."

**Interview: Paul Allen's artificial intelligence guru on the future of robots and humanity**  
(<http://www.geekwire.com/2016/geekwire-radio-paul-allens-artificial-intelligence-guru-future-robots-humanity/>)



"We've shown that monetization on this channel is much, much higher than regular JD.com channels," Microsoft R&D VP Hsiao-Wuen Hon said. "It will be very interesting to have something that people actually trust."

Gendering AI boils down to business. Customers interpret these AI personalities through the lens of their own biases. Whether its stereotypes about women in service roles, the desire for a female companion, or simply that feeling of trust that a woman's voice instills, female AI personalities are easier for most consumers to adopt. And adoption is the ultimate goal for tech companies that want to make AI mainstream.

"We don't know what the right answers are," said Hanson in a recent panel on robotics and AI (<http://www.geekwire.com/2016/robots-sale-price-drop-android-market-open-new-frontiers-ai/>). "What I want to do is put tools in the hands of artists and product designers and ask them the questions to make sure we can address people's needs as effectively as possible. And I think the gender relationships with robots is one of those deep questions I don't have a full set of answers for."

### GeekWire Awards 2016: The Pacific Northwest's annual startup and technology awards.



MAY 12 | EMP

(<http://www.geekwire.com/events/geekwire-awards-2016/>)

GeekWire rolls out the red carpet each year at the EMP Museum in Seattle to honor the top innovators, entrepreneurs, startups and do-gooder geeks, as nominated and chosen by the GeekWire community. More than 800 people attend this fun event. Tickets available here (<http://www.geekwire.com/events/geekwire-awards-2016/>).

---

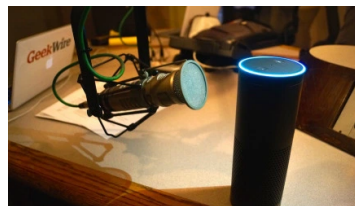
### Related Stories



(<http://www.geekwire.com/2015/amazon-echo-wont-spoil-star-wars-for-you-but-the-force-is-with-alexa/>)

**Amazon Echo may not use the Force, but Alexa can throw down some fun Star Wars knowledge**

(<http://www.geekwire.com/2015/amazon-echo-wont-spoil-star-wars-for-you-but-the-force-is-with-alexa/>)



(<http://www.geekwire.com/2015/geekwire-radio-amazon-echos-alexa-joins-us-special-guest/>)

**GeekWire Radio: Amazon Echo's Alexa joins us as our special guest** (<http://www.geekwire.com/2015/geekwire-radio-amazon-echos-alexa-joins-us-special-guest/>)



(<http://www.geekwire.com/2016/microsoft-debuts-millennial-minded-ai-chat-bot-understand-teens-talk/>)

**Meet 'Tay': Microsoft debuts millennial-minded AI chatbot to understand how the kids talk**

(<http://www.geekwire.com/2016/microsoft-debuts-millennial-minded-ai-chat-bot-understand-teens-talk/>)



(<http://www.geekwire.com/2015/amazon-makes-echos-alexa-available-to-developers-and-device-manufacturers-launches-100m-fund/>)

**Amazon makes Echo's Alexa available to developers and device makers, launches \$100M fund**

(<http://www.geekwire.com/2015/amazon-makes-echos-alexa-available-to-developers-and-device-manufacturers-launches-100m-fund/>)

#### Previous Story

Seattle software startup that helps airlines boost revenue acquired by travel-focused Mercator

(<http://www.geekwire.com/2016/seattle-based-revenue-management-systems-acq/>)

#### Next Story

Venmo's secret sauce: PayPal CEO on the future of the fast-growing social payments app

(<http://www.geekwire.com/2016/secrets-venmo-paypal-ceo-dan-schulman-fast-growing-payment-app-millennials-love/>)

Like what you're reading? Subscribe to GeekWire's free newsletters to catch every headline

---

## Comments

**jdrch** · 8 days ago

Except there are numerous counterexamples of male intelligent software agents both in practice and in culture:

- 1) AskJeeves, the first mainstream service to widely claim it could answer natural language questions, is male.
- 2) Watson is presented as being male.
- 3) Wolfram Alpha is gender neutral.
- 4) I daresay most AIs in fictional culture are male.

Perhaps we should be celebrating our society associating females with knowledge and logic as a compliment.

^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ›

**Jered** → jdrch · 8 days ago

There's a pretty clear difference between the roles assigned to "male" and "female" AIs. "Male" AIs, like the ones you listed, are about knowledge and authority, while the "female" ones tend to fall into service roles like navigation, setting up calendar appointments, etc. The article doesn't claim there are no "male" AIs, instead it argues that "female" AIs are more prevalent and the difference between them indicates a not-so-subtle cultural role gendering.

1 ^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ›

**tick** → Jered · 7 days ago

The role distinction I would agree with, but in terms of more female AIs than male AIs, I'm not sure. There are so many male AIs in entertainment, Data (star trek), daryl, AI, I suspect there are way more male than female.

Now if the article stuck to gender roles, or perhaps made the argument of most recent entertainment being female...

^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ›

**Snek** → Jered · 7 days ago

That is still a compliment? You are trusting a "female" AI to guide you to your destination, making sure your on time, giving you accurate reports on weather and events?

^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ›

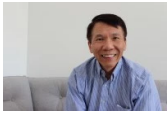
## Most Popular on GeekWire



(<http://www.geekwire.com/2016/amazon-now-three-ceos-online-retailer-promotes-andy-jassy-jeff-wilke/>)



Amazon now has three CEOs: Tech powerhouse promotes Andy Jassy and Jeff Wilke to CEO roles of respective divisions (<http://www.geekwire.com/2016/amazon-now-three-ceos-online-retailer-promotes-andy-jassy-jeff-wilke/>)



Uber CTO reveals how Travis Kalanick hired him and offers advice for entrepreneurs (<http://www.geekwire.com/2016/qa-uber-cto/>)



Astronaut Scott Kelly says he suffered

damaging stress during year in space (<http://www.geekwire.com/2016/astronaut-scott-kelly-hints-psychological-stress-year-space/>)



In annual letter, Jeff

Bezos says Amazon is an 'invention machine' defined by failure (<http://www.geekwire.com/2016/annual-letter-jeff-bezos-says-amazon-defined-failure-good-thing/>)



---

## Job Listings on GeekWork



(<http://www.geekwire.com/jobs/job/rover-com-seattle-2-senior-software-developer-full-stack-2/>)

Senior Software Developer, Full-Stack

(<http://www.geekwire.com/jobs/job/rover-com-seattle-2-senior-software-developer-full-stack-2/>)

Rover.com



(<http://www.geekwire.com/jobs/job/seattle-sounders-fc-seattle-2-senior-application-developer-seattle-sounders-fc/>)

Senior Application Developer, Seattle Sounders FC

(<http://www.geekwire.com/jobs/job/seattle-sounders-fc-seattle-2-senior-application-developer-seattle-sounders-fc/>)

Seattle Sounders FC



Research Scientist (<http://www.geekwire.com/jobs/job/the-allen-institute-for-artificial-intelligence-ai2-seattle-2-research-scientist/>)

(<http://www.geekwire.com/jobs/job/the-allen-institute-for-artificial-intelligence-ai2-seattle-2-research-scientist/>)

The Allen Institute for Artificial Intelligence (AI2)

Find more jobs on GeekWork (</jobs/>). Employers, post a job here (</jobs/pricing/>).

---

## A Word From Our Sponsors



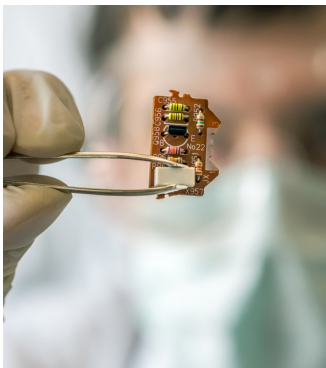
(<http://bit.ly/23mOsq8>)

**Flatiron Online Coding School Guarantees Job Placement** Click here for free Intro to Programming course. (<http://bit.ly/23mOsq8>)



(<http://bit.ly/1Vx9rEe>)

**Stay ahead of the competition. Don't just think different; do different.** Be a digital disruptor and take your company to the next level. Email us at [info@level11.com](mailto:info@level11.com) or visit us at [www.level11.com](http://www.level11.com). (<http://bit.ly/1Vx9rEe>)



(<https://www.stratos.com/blog/making-licensed-technology-work%20%20>)

**Utilizing an unproven technology in product development? Make sure it's worth the risk.** Learn more. (<https://www.stratos.com/blog/making-licensed-technology-work%20%20>)



**Meet Startup425 Resolve: Helping startups resolve conflict** [Read More](http://www.geekwire.com/sponsor-post/meet-startup425-resolve-helping-startups-resolve-conflict/)  
(<http://www.geekwire.com/sponsor-post/meet-startup425-resolve-helping-startups-resolve-conflict/>)



**Earn your MBA in just 18 months. Discover the Technology Management MBA Program.** Learn more at an information session and dinner April 4th in Kirkland or online April 15th. (<http://foster.uw.edu/academics/degree-programs/technology-management-mba/>)

(<http://foster.uw.edu/academics/degree-programs/technology-management-mba/>)

**Galactic Sponsors**



(<http://bit.ly/1djjHc1>)

**Platinum Sponsors**

--	--



(<http://www.wavebroadband.com/business/>)



(<http://www.ey.com/>)

## Gold Sponsors



(<http://www.add3.com/>)



([http://www.knoll.com/knoll\\_home.jsp](http://www.knoll.com/knoll_home.jsp))



(<http://killerinfographics.com/>)



(<http://upsconnect.com/geekwire>)



(<http://www.moz.com/>)



(<http://freshconsulting.com/>)

## Silver Sponsors



THE PRIVATE BANK  
(<https://www.wellsfargo.com/t>)



(<http://www.seattleu.edu/scierid=58927>)



(<https://offerupnow.com/>)



(<https://www.firsttechfed.com>)



(<http://www.whitepages.com/>)



(<http://www.wsgr.com/>)



(<http://www.realself.com/>)



(<http://bit.ly/1JhUj8C>)

**PERKINScoie**  
COUNSEL TO GREAT COMPANIES  
(<http://www.perkinscoie.com/>)

**ATLAS**  
(<http://beta.atlas.co/>)

**Avalara**  
(<http://www.avalara.com/>)

**STRATOS**  
(<https://www.stratos.com/>)

**SIRQUL™**  
(<http://corp.sirqul.com/>)

## About

[About GeekWire \(/about-geekwire/\)](/about-geekwire/)

[Contact Us \(/contact-us/\)](/contact-us/)

[Ask About Advertising \(/advertise/\)](/advertise/)

[Send Us a Tip \(/tips/\)](/tips/)

[Apply for Startup Spotlight \(/startup-spotlight-apply/\)](/startup-spotlight-apply/)

[Apply for Geek of the Week \(/apply-geekwire-geek-of-the-week/\)](/apply-geekwire-geek-of-the-week/)

[Become a GeekWire Member \(/memberships/\)](/memberships/)

[Join Our Startup List \(/submit-startup/\)](/submit-startup/)

## Follow

[f](https://www.facebook.com/geekwire) (<https://www.facebook.com/geekwire>) [t](https://twitter.com/intent/user?screen_name=geekwire) ([https://twitter.com/intent/user?screen\\_name=geekwire](https://twitter.com/intent/user?screen_name=geekwire))

[in](https://www.linkedin.com/company/geekwire) (<https://www.linkedin.com/company/geekwire>) [g+](https://plus.google.com/+GeekWire) (<https://plus.google.com/+GeekWire>) [RSS](/rss-feeds/) (</rss-feeds/>)

[p](/podcast/) (</podcast/>) [You Tube](https://www.youtube.com/user/GeekWire) (<https://www.youtube.com/user/GeekWire>)

## GeekWire Newsletters

Catch every headline in your inbox

Subscribe

## GeekWire Apps

[🍏 iOS](http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/geekwire/id482653203?mt=8) (<http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/geekwire/id482653203?mt=8>)

[🤖 Android](https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.geekwire&hl=en) (<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.geekwire&hl=en>)

[📰 Apple News](https://apple.news/T-EsjXXc_SUaixm4bcBSpAw) ([https://apple.news/T-EsjXXc\\_SUaixm4bcBSpAw](https://apple.news/T-EsjXXc_SUaixm4bcBSpAw))

[🪟 Windows Phone](http://www.windowsphone.com/en-us/store/app/geekwire/0dc8871a-fdd1-4ce6-bccb-7634199094b4) (<http://www.windowsphone.com/en-us/store/app/geekwire/0dc8871a-fdd1-4ce6-bccb-7634199094b4>)

Windows 8 (<http://apps.microsoft.com/windows/en-us/app/4a9e25d8-f15d-46c8-bcd8-af27fe04e61e>)

Google Play Newsstand (<https://play.google.com/store/newsstand/news?id=CAowr7HbCg>)

## **GeekWire Developer Blog (/devblog/)**

[↑ Return to Top of Page](#)

[Privacy Policy \(/privacy/\)](/privacy/) | [Terms of Use \(/termsofuse/\)](/termsofuse/)

© 2011-2016 GeekWire, LLC