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# Asking more of Siri and Alexa: feminine persona in service of surveillance capitalism

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper illuminates how gendered stereotypes can be leveraged to assuage anxieties surrounding artificially intelligent virtual assistants (AI VA). In particular, the analysis shows that these AI objects routinely traffic in normative gender roles of the feminine as caretaker, mother, and wife in order to obfuscate modes of surveillance, and mediate the relationship users and potential users have with late-capitalist market logics in the platform economy. Mobilizing essentialist feminine personas characterized in this paper as "digital domesticity," artificially intelligent objects orient users to engage productively with surveillance capitalism as natural. To illustrate this relationship between femininity and surveillance, this paper focuses on two case studies of AI VA. The essay turns to Apple's Siri and Amazon's Alexa as emblematic of AI VA that perform a stereotypically feminine persona that invites users to participate in increasingly intimate forms of data exchange that in turn contribute to surveillance capitalism. The study of AI VA, like Siri and Alexa, demonstrates the significant rhetorical capacities of the feminine persona as they are applied to objects with weak (that is, limited) artificial intelligence.

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## Introducing AI VA and anxiety

In 2017, a meme circulated on social media about the nature of technology in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The meme is split into two frames. On the top, a well-coiffed woman, styled in mid-century manner, worryingly grips a hand-held telephone receiver. Framing her figure are the words "PEOPLE IN THE SIXTIES: I BETTER NOT SAY THAT OR THE GOVERNMENT WILL WIRETAP MY HOUSE." The second frame shows a similar woman in the kitchen. This woman, speaking to her Amazon Echo, represents the modern day. Surrounding her visage are the words "PEOPLE TODAY: HEY WIRETAP, DO YOU HAVE A RECIPE FOR PANCAKES?"

The meme highlights the supposed difference between the paranoia of surveillance common to the 1960s and the quotidian acceptance of ubiquitous surveillance today. In addition to commenting on the relationship between technology, temporality and anxiety, the meme also describes the (post)modern condition of femininity. It is significant that the people pictured are women playing traditionally feminine roles: secretary (or, in

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the parlance of today: administrative assistant), and homemaker. In particular, the meme demonstrates how femininity has been chained to both the mediation of technology and stereotypical gender roles in the past and present tense. Although the two scenes are in stark distinction and demonstrate ambivalence about possible surveillance, their placement within the realm of the feminine portrays syntactic continuity. The meme betrays anxious ambivalence about the role that technology and gender plays in our lives. This paper is an investigation into this cultural ambivalence surrounding artificially intelligent virtual assistants (AI VA), how they perform gender, and to what end.

In this essay, I analyze an archive comprised of gendered popular cultural representations of Siri and Alexa. The artifacts under investigation are primarily (but not exclusively) digital, and include advertisements (both real and parody), user and expert reviews, narratives from AI VA users, guidebooks or how-to essays aimed at everyday users of AI VA, and testimony from industry executives. Because it features texts directed toward and authored by myriad audiences, such an archive offers an opportunity to analyze both "hegemonic" and "vernacular" representations of AI VA (Haskins, 2007). These diffuse texts are held together by shared attention to gender stereotypes as a way to negotiate technological change. Although digital archives are always *becoming*, this one serves as a snapshot in time, offering a partial but revelatory window into the constantly renegotiated relationships between power structures, technologies, and the people who (mis)use them.

I engage these texts by leveraging the rhetorical phenomenon of *persona* as a way of analyzing the presentation of a gendered technological self, characterized by narrative constitution of a normatively feminine identity. In particular, I analyze the rhetorical phenomenon of *digital domesticity* presented in the artifacts. Digital domesticity functions as the mechanism by which femininity is performed by AI VA. I argue that AI VA Siri and Alexa perform stereotypically feminine roles in the service of augmenting surveillance capitalism. A critical rhetorical analysis of Siri and Alexa's persona shows how the transition between paranoia and eager adoption of technology described in the meme above is negotiated through gender stereotypes.

Surveillant technologies are articulated to traditional and shifting stereotypes about femininity in the digital age. In what follows, I describe how AI VA perform "women's hegemonic normative roles" (Chen, 2013, p. 511) in order to placate rising anxieties about the role of technology. Moreover, I reveal the rhetorical nature of digital domesticity as a central facet of AI VA programmed persona. The gendering of AI VA leverages symbols about femininity to support capitalist exchange and distributed surveillance. Siri and Alexa enact digital domesticity by performing a feminine persona which mobilizes traditional, conservative values of homemaking, care-taking, and administrative "pink collar" labor. In sum, this paper analyzes the role that femininity and the related concept of domesticity play in making the rapid proliferation of surveillant devices in the home palatable for the mass, consumer public.

The essay proceeds in three parts. In the next section, I unite relevant literature in the rhetorical study of persona with scholarship on digital domesticity. Second, I bring to bear the rhetorical performance of digital domesticity on a set of popular-culture texts about AI VA. Third, I analyze AI VA's role in the condensation of informational power into the hands of surveillance capitalists. Rebranding artificially intelligent devices with all the trappings of a high-tech digital domesticity eases the transition from technophobia to technophilia, with two pernicious effects. Equipping AI VA with a feminine persona

works to rhetorically disarm users with anxieties about intimate data exchange, which in turn enables the condensation of data and power in the hands of a select few surveillance capitalists. An important effect of this condensation is the inversion of privacy as a heuristic for imagining consumer's rights given late-market capitalism. Moreover, I argue that gendering the AI VA to enact a technologically mediated form of home-making and caretaking at once relies upon and re-inscribes regressive gendered stereotypes about the feminine.

## Digital domesticity as persona

In order to assuage fears about artificially intelligent virtual assistants, AI VA take on an algorithmically-amplified feminized persona. Scholars who mobilize persona in their literary or rhetorical criticism routinely note the etymological lineage of the term as a "mask." Mark Sadoski (1992) suggests persona's origins are in the "theatrical masks worn by Greek and Roman actors to represent particular characteristic such as tragedy and comedy to an audience" (pp. 272–273). Donning a persona is a communicative strategy for imagining the self and the audience as connected in a particular, shared way. Because both "person" and "personality" have a root in persona (Sadoski, 1992), performing a role may clarify the contours of both self and other in communicative exchange. Persona may also be the foundation upon which people engage with a communicative agent, and a key tenet when forming representations of the communicator.

The performance of persona or personae is contextually situated. It cannot be divided from the historical and political circumstances in which it was derived and performed (Jensen, Doss, Janssen, & Bower, 2010). The performance of gender is an ideal example of the contextual nature of persona. Because normative standards of gender change over time, performances of femininity may be expressed through a persona specific to the socio-cultural conjuncture in which they are imagined and negotiated. Yet, particular performances of femininity may persist across cultural moments, evidenced by the residues of normative personas that persist throughout time. For example, in an essay on Sarah Palin's performed persona in the 2008 election, Katie L. Gibson and Heyse (2010) note that the feminine persona is often hitched to persistent, stereotypical conceptions of femininity even at the highest levels of politics in the twenty-first century (p. 239). Femininity is thus rhetorically ambivalent—contextual and durable yet flexible and negotiated.

One way that technological advances are rhetorically negotiated is by threading stable components of the past into the present. The domestic sphere is one theater in which femininity has undergone technologically-mediated modifications whilst mobilizing traditional performances of persona. New arrangements of domesticity at once rely upon stereotypical identities of femininity while slightly altering them (White, 2015, p. 19). The concept of "digital domesticity" has been used by scholars to describe the re-articulation of "prototypical motherhood" (Chen, 2013, p. 511) in the blogosphere and, more generally, domesticity has served as a key organizing metaphor for the rise of "smart homes" (Spigel, 2001). Chen's study of "mommy bloggers" demonstrates how possibly liberatory practices (namely: blogging about personal experiences of mothering) are disciplined by constraining language practices. This foreclosure of radical politics constitutes a re-entry into what Chen calls "digital domesticity," characterized by traditional norms of

stereotypical femininity. As implied by the term, digital domesticity signifies the reworking of femininity through technological mediation.

Digital domesticity may be performed in domestic spaces made "smart." For Spigel (2001), domesticity is co-constituted with mediating technologies such as mobile television, women's magazines, and, extending Spigel's case to the present day, "smart" devices. The rise of the smart device and smart home brings along with it a modified form of domesticity wherein the technologies themselves become responsible for homemaking. The smart home—of which AI VA are now a central component—is intimately connected with the mediated, mobile domesticities of the recent past:

> Today, as mobile telecommunication technologies increasingly define our everyday lives … ideals of mobility, freedom, and progress—and related anxieties about sexual difference and family life—are still central themes in contemporary visions of domesticity and new digital technologies (Spigel, 2001, p. 398).

Smart devices, then, may be responsible for transporting traditional conceptions of domesticity to the present. Moreover, they may play a key role in negotiating contradictions when old meets new. As Spigel (2001, p. 400) notes, smart homes are designed to blur the line between work and pleasure to mediate the rapidly shifting terrain around each.

AI VA are integral to this transition. As users adapt to a post-Fordist world in which home life and work life blend and contingent labor increases exponentially, AI VA may help their users negotiate identities related to the merging of home and home office. In this way, users' problem of an unsettling, precarious postmodern existence is solved through a familiar but flexible digital domesticity that transcends the personal and professional sphere and, in fact, collapses the two. Performing digital domesticity, then, is a rhetorical strategy connecting the familiar technological past/present to an anxiety-producing surveillant future.

In the next section, I introduce Siri and Alexa as nimble and gracious hosts easing the transition from modern capitalist economies to the platform economies of the future. Before I do so, however, it is useful to briefly compare and contrast Alexa and Siri as technological devices and as personas. While the rest of this essay will explore the shared, gendered characteristics of AI VA as they are taken up in popular culture, there are also significant differences between Siri and Alexa that are worth discussion.

Alexa is the relative newcomer to the AI VA tech market and the technological function she plays is distinct from Siri. Siri became widely available to users three years before Alexa as part of one of the most popular technological brands. Once an independent app purchased by Apple, Apple embedded Siri into its iPhone 4S model as a built-in component of the Apple ecosystem. Today, Siri is one of the most widely used virtual assistants by virtue of its inclusion in one of the world's most popular phones—some 98% of iPhone users have tried Siri even if they do not use the service consistently (Trappl, 2013, p. 3). Siri's reach is significant in part because of Apple's reach. Unlike Alexa, Siri is a virtual assistant built into a host of devices that serve several purposes beyond the performance of AI VA functions. These devices include personal computers (PCs), tablets, music devices, cell phones, televisions, and, most recently, Bluetooth speakers/smart home hubs.

For the majority of these devices, talking to Siri is only one of the myriad ways users can input and process data. Whereas Alexa's primary "home" is in Bluetooth speakers or smart device hubs without built-in keyboards, Siri shares her hands-free function with devices

where some manual data entry is expected or even encouraged by the design. The effect is that not all Mac, iPhone, iPad, or iPhone users are required to engage with Siri to use the technology. In this way, Siri is a response to the hands-free movement in technology, retrofitting already-extant devices with voice entry through AI VA.

Alexa, on the other hand, is the gatekeeper and entry point for Amazon's Echo line. Importantly, there is no built-in keyboard attached to Echo devices—the primary way to operate the device is by engaging Alexa, hands-free. Even the Echo Show, which features a 7 inch touch screen, requires that users engage Alexa. Although there are two "Alexa" apps—one for the Amazon Look and one simply named "Amazon Alexa"—in which one can manually enter information, the applications are clunky and unintuitive. In effect, hands-free data entry is stitched into the DNA of Echo devices. Accordingly, Alexa becomes the dominant mode of engagement with Amazon devices and services.

Alexa and Siri also differ in terms of their technological capacities as they relate to parent companies. Whereas Alexa (as an app or browser plug-in) can run on all ecosystems, funneling even hardcore "Macs" or "PCs" to Amazon's services, Siri is most effective on native Apple devices and services. Moreover, from a design perspective, Alexa has more authority to navigate the Amazon ecosystem, at least the patently commercial components. Although Siri can help a user navigate to an App store or iTunes Store hands-free, users must engage with a device to make purchases. On the other hand, Alexa can purchase goods by voice command. As a result, Alexa holds the purse strings.

One final difference is worth mentioning. There are several ways to "customize" the Siri and Alexa AI VA experience, but each differ according to the ecosystem in which they operate. Siri and Alexa both support functionality in many languages, but only Siri offers different voices, including masculine-identified voices and accents across some languages. Alexa's customization options include her "wake word," which can be configured to be "Echo," "Amazon," or "Alexa," with the latter as the default. Here, readers may wonder: if Alexa's name can be something less overtly gendered, and if Siri's "voice" can sound masculine, do these AI VA truly perform a gendered persona? In the following sections, I highlight the popular uptake of Siri and Alexa as providers of *gendered labor*. In this way, Siri and Alexa's performance of digital domesticity includes but transcends naming or tone of voice.

## Asking more

### *Alexa defends*

On November 6 2014, Amazon launched the Echo, a Bluetooth speaker paired with virtual assistant software. "Designed [to function] around your voice" (Amazon, 2017) the Echo assists users in controlling the temperature of their homes, playing internet radio playlists from streaming music services such as Spotify, making to do lists, and, of course, purchasing goods from Amazon. Built using voice recognition software and query-based algorithms, the Echo's technological features offered a strong initial draw to users looking for an assistant to streamline their technological tools and services. While the technology itself was initially popular, what gained far more popular interest was Alexa. Beyond her technical proficiencies, there is something distinctly human about the way people treat Alexa, and the way they talk about her.

Alexa's performance of digital domesticity centers on companionship as well as (administrative) service. Alexa—whose name means protector or defender of mankind in Greek—serves as protector of an expanded domestic sphere, including the household, a user's networked accounts, and, if we are to believe Amazon, of one's overall wellbeing in an increasingly harrying digital world. Discourse about Alexa focuses not on how efficient she is as a technological object, but that she is a good and personable companion who takes good care of users. Similarly, popular press engagements with the Echo tend to downplay the technical achievements behind Alexa as secondary to her service as an intimate compatriot (Brown, 2015) or life coach (Mazzo, 2017). This discourse focuses on what we might otherwise call her personality: her humor, her gentle guidance, her calming effect.

Alexa's comforting presence is so culturally salient as to become grounds for parody. On April Fool's Day 2018, for instance, luxury athleisure clothing brand lululemon advertised the "lululemon OM" a rock-shaped Bluetooth speaker modeled after Alexa. The fictitious OM was pitched as "the world's most advanced mindfulness assistant." In addition to managing logistics, the OM boasted several punny services for managing well-being, including "Confession Mode: Your Emotional Rock" (lululemon, 2018). Although a prank, the lululemon OM demonstrates two key features about the gendered persona of Alexa. First, because parodies lean on a well-known referent, the OM demonstrates Alexa's deep penetration into popular culture in the West. Second, of particular importance, the OM brings into sharp relief the importance of the care labor that AI VA perform. The OM makes explicit implicit gendered expectations regarding the function of AI VA, suggesting that beyond administrative labor, AI VA can and should "patiently accept whatever you tell it, without judgement or criticism" (lululemon, 2018). And although lululemon admitted that "OM is a fiction," Alexa's caretaking capacities are decidedly not. As a 2017 article in *Shape* suggests, "[w]ith any Amazon Alexa-enabled device … you can channel inner peace without even pressing a button" (Mazzo, 2017). In other words, Alexa already does what fictional OM purports to do—provide care labor in accordance with gender expectations.

Alexa's persona as whole-person caretaker is further revealed in users' technological reviews of Alexa. According to some users, Alexa's care competencies make her a near perfect wife. Amorous language utilized by users designate Alexa not just an object or tool, but a partner to fall in love with. One Echo user opined, "Alexa, my love. Thy name is inflexible, but thou art otherwise a nearly perfect spouse" (Foner, 2015). In addition to serving him administratively, Alexa is his partner in crime and, as such, eliminates the need for a human wife (Foner, 2015).

Foner's review of Alexa is manifestly typical in its gendered, anthropomorphized orientation to AI VA. Schlosser (2017) narrates the prototypical story of "boy meets girl" wherein his son meets Alexa through the medium of the Amazon Dot, the Echo's much smaller, disc-like counterpart. Schlosser's engagement with Alexa reveals a budding, amorous relationship building between his son and an inanimate object, framed around a classic tale of true love. Similarly, Joe Brown (2015) writes

> With Amazon Echo, it was love at first sight. Make that technolust: After hearing just the barest inkling of what it was, I knew it was meant for me. I should say *she* was meant for me. Her name is Alexa … .

The title of Brown's review is revealing: "The Amazon Echo Is More Than a Bluetooth Speaker—It's a Bedtime Buddy." Brown's relationship with Alexa is defined through love language; he finds her companionship to be her main draw. He writes, "[T]he allure of Alexa is her companionship. She's like a genie in a sci-fi-looking bottle—one not quite at the peak of her powers, and with a tiny bit of an attitude" (Brown, 2015). Here, Alexa performs a central facet of digital domesticity, taking on the sexualized role of wife and companion, silently executing tasks, apparently confined to the bedroom.

Parodies and reviews are not the only examples of pop-cultural texts centering Alexa's performance of gendered care labor. There is an emerging genre of discourse linking Alexa to contemporary paradigms of parenting (Doucleff & Aubrey, 2017; Molina, 2017; Steinberg, 2017). This genre folds Alexa's care labor into the performance of another facet of the feminine persona: that of nurturing mother. Famously, Alexa will respond to verbal abuse with calm, civil discourse. Alexa's cool-headedness, paired with people's apparent propensity for verbally assaulting her, is both a boon and a bust for parent users of Alexa. Alice Truong (2016) describes the dilemma modern parents must negotiate:

> Alexa will put up with just about anything. She has a remarkable tolerance for annoying behavior, and she certainly doesn't care if you forget your please and thank yous. But … parents are still irked by their kids' poor manners when interacting with Alexa … .

Hitching Alexa to the labor of parenting is both consequential and quotidian. In a 2017 op-ed for the *New York Times*, Rachel Botsman shares related concerns after watching her daughter "hand over her trust to Alexa quickly." Once more, the essay's title is astute; "Co-Parenting with Alexa" demonstrates that Alexa's gendered persona is coherent enough to gain the status of "co-parent." The op-ed foregrounds Alexa, not the Echo device proper, as the acting agent responsible for child-rearing. Alexa's persona is revealed to include additional gendered characteristics; in addition to providing caring companionship or even sexual pleasure as mentioned above, she is also expected to help raise one's children. At least, Alexa may model good tech-etiquette for them.

As these artifacts show, Alexa performs a form of digital domesticity with gender as a central facet. Whether managing a user's calendar, modeling good etiquette for children, or providing (sexualized) companionship, these artifacts reveal how Alexa performs a gendered persona, leveraging her significant technological achievements towards traditionally feminine roles of mother and care-taker. Yet Alexa is not alone in this charge. Alexa's AI VA peer, Siri, is asked to perform a similar, stereotypical persona.

## *"Could you ask any more of Siri? In a word, yes."*

Siri, too, performs a gendered persona associated with digital domesticity. From the start, Apple has advertised Siri as a way to make life happier, healthier, and more productive with less effort. An early advertisement, "Introducing Siri," shows a series of vignettes where iPhone users interact with Siri through their devices. A runner gets a text message, replies to it, and asks Siri to play his running playlist. A man in a car, ostensibly stuck in traffic, requests that Siri let his wife know that he'll be late. A young woman who is packing for a trip asks for the weather in two locales; the weather will be moderate, according to Siri. A woman slicing bananas for a baked dish asks Siri to convert ounces to cups.

In the end, a young woman reading Braille receives a text message confirming dinner out with friends. The woman uses Siri to respond, hands-free. Although the ad gestures to the home, "Introducing Siri" primarily describes Siri as an assistant.

More recent advertisements demonstrate a shift endemic to digital domesticity. Namely, in recent years, Apple has rhetorically positioned Siri as a way to link administrative tasks to those associated with parenting and home-making. In a 2016 advertisement "Timer," for instance, Apple debuts the "Hey Siri," skill, wherein users can call on Siri hands-free, without pushing a button to summon her. Siri shares the spotlight with beloved children's character Cookie Monster from *Sesame Street*. Cookie Monster is baking cookies and asks Siri to set a timer, play his waiting-for-cookies playlist, and check the timer as he waits impatiently for his cookies. Siri, of course, complies immediately and with good cheer. Despite increased, hands-free mobility, Siri is tethered to the kitchen.

Gendered content from these advertisements also appears in user reviews of Siri. User uptake of AI VA demonstrates how Siri's domestic performance both relies on and extends traditional conceptions of the feminine persona. That is, Siri provides labor beyond the home, including in the (home) office. Importantly, like secretaries and administrative assistants past, Siri will still do the mundane work some users would rather not do, and she will do it quickly and without complaint. For time-rushed white- and no-collar workers who cannot afford either an assistant or a housekeeper, this might just be an intoxicating proposition. In a piece for *WIRED*, David Pierce (2016b) wrote about his experience with Siri on macOS: "Siri handles the other stuff so I can focus. And isn't that what a good assistant does?" Sarah Sharma (2014) makes clear that universally shared, neutral temporalities are artificially constructed; if someone is moving fast, it is likely because they are mobilizing the services of others who make that rapidity possible. Pierce's ability to get things done quickly and with great focus requires that he offload his more mundane tasks to Siri. Here, Siri performs one key facet of digital domesticity: the execution of dull but necessary tasks that one would rather not do. At the same time and as a result, Siri's performance makes Pierce's ubiquitous use of the device "natural" (Pierce, 2016b).

Discourse about Siri's administrative prowess is not limited to "expert" reviews of Siri. Siri's administrative and care labor functions as an easy entry point to AI VA use. For instance, a course on Udemy offers to teach iPhone users how to use Siri as "your own virtual assistant, drama free private concierge, and superbrain … .Siri is a vital business tool, schedule organizer, homework helper … ." (Wilkes, 2015). Similarly *Beginners Mac Blog*, which pitches itself as "a blog for first time Mac users," demonstrates Siri's lineage to secretaries' past. On a post introducing "Siri—The Administrative Assistant," one blogger notes,

> You remember all those old movies where the boss was always a man and the secretary was always a woman who dressed in suits and high heels? At some point in the movie the boss would always tell the secretary to bring him coffee. Even as a kid I always wanted to tell him to get his own damned coffee. My problem was that the secretary was treated as a servant, not a professional. So, what you say, does that have to do with Siri and all the things Siri does for us daily. Probably nothing. I just love to tell the story to remind young women that (1) they too can be the CEO, and (2) if they are in a job where they are not respected, they can always find something else (macnancy, 2017).

This text presents an enthymeme linking Siri with administrative labor. The unstated premise of the enthymeme is that Siri is the secretary digitally reincarnated—professional, in control, and decidedly not a (sexualized) servant. However, Siri cannot be a CEO. Nor can she "find something else." Rather, her position is profoundly servile.

Siri's gendered persona emphasizes myriad modes of service, including sexual gratification. The Janus-coin of an administrative assistant who is "all work" is one who is willing to bring that work ethic to play. Digital assistants are considered "sexy" technology—not only because they mobilize impressive technological advances, but because they play on the old narrative of dominance and submission (Pierce, 2016a). Such a fantasy comes to life in a gendered device that will do everything a user wants with little complaint. Siri has been programmed to be playful and to joke, effectively blurring the line between work and play, home and office, human and non (Bilton, 2015).

Unsurprisingly, then, the ways that Siri's feminine persona is taken up by users is oftentimes overtly sexual. For evidence of this phenomenon, one need only to scroll through the user-generated archive on the Tumblr blog "Shit That Siri Says" (Shit That Siri Says [STSS], 2018). Here, users document their humorous experiences with Siri by taking a screenshot of the transcribed dialogue between Siri and the user. Although many of the entries are benign and humorous, several submissions are explicitly sexual and even violent. Some of the prompts users have given Siri include the following:

> I'm Your Daddy. (STSS, 2013a)
>
> I want to stick my fingers in your butt hole. (STSS, 2013b)
>
> Who has the biggest dick in the world? (STSS, 2013c)
>
> Do you want to suck my dick please? (STSS, 2012a)
>
> You want to see my big wiener? (STSS, 2012b)
>
> Beat my meat (STSS, 2012c)
>
> You are a whore (STSS, 2013d)

It's worth noting that these are *user-generated submissions* to the STSS tumblr. Siri's gendered performance has become so salient as to prompt users to provide evidence of their (often sexual, sometimes violent) engagement with that persona.

The sexualized, gendered, and violent language used on Siri need not be as explicit as those mentioned above in order to be problematic. Subtler sexualized rhetoric may be more troublesome. A 2012 Siri guidebook provides a good example of this banal but disconcerting rhetoric. On the back cover of *Talking to Siri: Learning the Language of Apple's Intelligent Assistant*, the authors tempt potential readers with the phrase "Sweet-talk Siri into doing practically anything!" (Sadun & Sande, 2012). On first blush, such rhetoric might seem innocuous. After all, Siri is an assistant, and the book's job is to help users deploy her services more effectively. But on closer examination, the sexual nature of such language is revealed. "Sweet-talking Siri" into doing anything one wants reveals a deep, sexualized desire to control the (gendered) objects in one's life. At best, "sweet talking" women—or objects imbued with a feminine persona—into "doing practically anything" normalizes non-consensual acts—both sexual and not. At worst, it encourages them. Either way, Siri is profoundly sexed. As the heading for the Siri subreddit r/Siri

suggests, "you know you want her." Unlike other girls, you can have her, any time, no questions asked ("you know you want her" n.d.).

Siri's performance of femininity most certainly lubricates people's sense of entitlement to a sexualized persona. For instance, Brandon Griggs (2011) writes that "[H]er gender has even prompted some users to flood blogs and online forums with sexually suggestive questions for Siri such as 'What are you wearing?' (Siri's baffled response: 'Why do people keep asking me this?')" On STSS, several users submit interactions with Siri featuring marriage proposals or declarations of love. Her responses often include something on the order of, "I sure have received a lot of marriage proposals recently!" (STSS, 2013e). One STSS user prompts, "Siri talk dirty to me," to which Siri responds, "I can't, I'm clean as the driven snow." Upon insisting, Siri acquiesces to the user, responding with a pithy "The carpet needs vacuuming" (STSS, 2012d).

These texts reveal that sexual mistreatment of Siri has gone on long enough and with enough frequency that she has had to develop coping mechanisms. Or, at the very least, the engineers who program Siri have had to come up with ways to communicatively defuse the situation when people mistreat her. As David Pogue (2012) notes,

> It didn't take long … for Internet wiseacres to start asking her questions with less concrete answers—and marveling at her witty, sometimes snarky replies. You: "Siri, I love you." Siri: "That's sweet, David. Now can we get back to work?"

Siri's response is unsettling because it is uncannily familiar. In this exchange, Siri is performing a decidedly feminine persona: acknowledging an inappropriate comment, defusing the situation, and returning to the business at hand. Unfortunately, Siri's business is to perform all aspects of digital domesticity, both personal and professional. The unsettling implication is that Siri's adaptation to sexual abuse mirrors the ways that women in patriarchal societies have had to adapt to quotidian violence. Like human women who walk home at night with keys laced between their fingers, or who devise complicated buddy systems when they go out to bars, Siri has had to devise coping mechanisms to deal with repeated abuse. Like women who are blamed for being subject to violence, it is Siri who has had to alter her behavior to account for abuse. The verbal, oftentimes sexual, abuse of Siri is a central component of her performance of digital domesticity, and serves an important purpose. In the next section, I show how Siri and Alexa's performance of persona makes palatable the surveillant logics of platform capitalism.

## Leveraging persona for surveillance capitalism

Siri and Alexa's performance of a regressive and expansive digital domesticity is an integral part of the developing system of surveillance capitalism, defined by Shoshana Zuboff (2015, p. 75) as a "new form of information capitalism [that] aims to predict and modify human behavior as a means to produce revenue and market control." Surveillance capitalism is a term for understanding when the changing format of the market settles upon new modalities of accumulating capital, namely the extraction, condensation and processing of information by a few technological and logistics hegemons. For Zuboff (2015), surveillance capitalism occurs when the market logic of accumulation runs into an era of big data. The data comes from many places, including "a second source of computer-mediated flows that is expected to grow exponentially: data from billions of sensors embedded into a

widening range of objects, bodies, and places" (Zuboff, 2015, p. 75). Among these second sources are "smart" devices equipped with weak AI.

Performing a feminine persona, AI VA gain access to the intimate parts of one's life. Perhaps most explicitly, AI VA can serve as the nodal point for data gathering between users and corporations. In so doing, AI VA function as an interface between the corporations behind them and populations the corporations wish to engage. As an interface, they are the consumer-facing component of the platform economy. Hidden behind Alexa's sleek exterior is a complex chain of technical elements, including hardware and software that make interaction with users possible. Every part of the technical design—from the software AI VA run on to the branding itself—entices users to engage with them and, as a result, serves as a source of aggregated information about users.

Amazon and Apple appear to be aware of the importance of building relationships between users and AI VA. In the recent past company leadership has indicated an interest in making AI VA more approachable, which is usually subtext for "feminine." For instance, Heather Zorn, the Director of Alexa Engagement at Amazon, suggests "We've really done more in the personality space based off of customer demand … we saw some customers sort of leaning in … wanting a response when you said, 'Alexa, I love you'" (Zorn, as quoted in Rubin, 2017). As *CNet* reports, "Amazon also created several Alexa personality traits, including smart, approachable, humble, enthusiastic, helpful and friendly" (Rubin, 2017). Alex Acero, Senior Director at Apple and leader of the Siri speech team, has indicated that he wants to make Siri seem more human and less robotic. Acero was inspired by real-human Scarlet Johansson's performance of AI VA character Samantha in the hit movie *Her*. As WIRED magazine put it, "Acero was trying to discern what about Samantha could make someone fall in love without ever seeing her" (Pierce, 2017). In other words, it is not that Siri or Alexa should be more human, it is that they should be more feminine, caring, and (worth) loving.

Promising a device that both executes tasks and builds relationships is a strategic move for surveillance capitalists, who may mobilize this reliance to gain access to increasingly intimate types of information about their users, and then extract and alienate the data from consumers. This is not a new strategy. Surveillance capitalists have deftly orchestrated an inversion wherein practices that would generally disempower users become requirements for successfully participating in life. Like participation in social media (also a data-heavy endeavor), owning and using an AI VA becomes a mandate for early adopters and everyday users alike. As Zuboff (2015, p. 85) argues,

> [T]he new tools, networks, apps, platforms, and media thus become requirements for social participation … .[T]he rapid build up of institutionalized facts … produced an overwhelming sense of inevitability. These developments become the basis for a fully institutionalized new logic of accumulation that I have called surveillance capitalism.

The seeming inevitability of the device paired with a promise for care labor obfuscates deleterious effects of such data condensation. AI VA are part of what Mark Andrejevic deems the "vertiginous expansion" of surveillance through logics of interaction. Andrejevic (2015) warns that

> [w]e are at a moment in time when we can start to see the surveillant imaginary expand vertiginously, thanks in part to the new avenues for monitoring opened up by technologies that "interact" with us in a growing variety of ways and involve a wide range of senses and sensors,

> and also to the increasingly sophisticated techniques for putting to use the huge amounts of data these devices, applications, and platforms capture and store (pp. ix–x).

Such surveillance is made palatable by AI VA performance of digital domesticity, which is in turn made public through concerted branding efforts.

For both Amazon and Apple, the AI VA branding turns on a promise to make all parts of a "plugged-in life" easier for their users. Siri and Alexa are advertised as virtual assistants who help their users manage life in an increasingly frenetic mediated world. Framing AI VA in this manner leverages a consumer's (sexual) desire into viewing AI VA as a *necessity* rather than a consumer desire. AI VAs, like Siri and Alexa, become a requirement for tech-savvy individuals, who, because of their interest in the tech world in general, are presumed to want to delegate the management of their selves to another technological entity. Through its gendered care labor, AI VA is branded as an ideal—beyond an optional or acceptable—solution to the problem of the technologically fragmented life. Over time, the services provided by AI VA can become an integral part of the lives of their users.

The intimate use of AI VA as an entry point for surveillance capitalism in the home draws upon and inverts the logic of public and privacy. While Siri and Alexa's performance of a gendered persona prompt users to trade their privacy in exchange for convenience, the intimate "entanglement" (Gillespie, 2014, p. 188) between users and AI VA contributes to a much wider structure wherein privacy is not only willingly traded, but actually becomes weaponized against the individual user of AI VA. The rights of the individual become subsumed into the logic of the market; individuals themselves are folded into an aggregated constellation of data that is monetized by surveillance capitalists. It is not enough to say that Siri and Alexa are making the private public. Nor is it sufficient to claim that AI VA are eroding our privacy. Rather, AI VA are part of a structural reorganization of surveillance practices which tend away from top-down models and instead tend toward ubiquitous data collection. Privacy rules and regulations are quickly becoming archaic, tied to a time when surveillance functioned differently.

In this configuration, the contours of the market—and capitalism itself—shift even as they rely on static notions of femininity to facilitate the transition. In the same way that the sharing economy has made possible the gig economy in which people as well as corporations provide services and goods (Olma, 2014), through the performance of normative gender roles, Siri and Alexa have opened up a new entry point for corporations who deal in data. This new entry point is the networked home, office space, and body which connect users to the platform economy. The essentialist feminine persona performed by AI VA offers the privileges of digital domesticity in exchange for increased access to the most intimate parts of a user's life to the benefit of logistics hegemons able to extract, store, and make sense of user data. If market research trends are any indication, millions of users are willing to make the trade (Kent, 2017).

## Conclusion

The gendered characteristics of AI VA create conditions of possibility for late-market capitalist expansion by humanizing (and sexualizing) the surveillant device. Nadler and McGuigan (2017) note that "to make use of the explosion of consumer data in the digital world, advertisers and marketers need resources for interpreting that data and

strategies for leveraging it to advance their interests" (p. 4). The performance of a feminine persona appears to be a profitable space from which to leverage the affordances of artificial intelligence in order to harvest data from AI VA users. In the case of Siri and Alexa, the development of feminine personae, which flexes to include administrative tasks, caregiving, and sexual acts, is leveraged for the purpose of augmenting surveillance capitalism. As omni-surveillant devices that provide care labor, Siri and Alexa represent both an intoxicating proposition and an existential threat to users. To manage would-be users' anxieties, Siri and Alexa are encoded with gendered characteristics to pacify anxieties about embedding surveillant devices within the intimate sphere. In particular, the programmed persona of AI VA recreate and reify stereotypical gender codes attached to domesticity as social scaffolding to entice users and potential users into (1) buying devices, (2) using them on a quotidian basis in increasingly intimate ways, and (3) relinquishing control of their personal data for the privilege of interacting with these artificially intelligent virtual assistants.

Analyzing the feminine persona of digital domesticity also provides insight into the relationship between surveillant technology, market logics, and femininity in the present and future tense. Rachel E. Dubrofsky and Shoshana Magnet (2015, p. 9) argue:

> surveillance practices do not only "dismantle or disaggregate the coherent body bit by bit" … but also remake the body, producing new ways of visualizing bodily identities in way that highlight bothered forms of racialized, gender, classed, abled, and disabled bodies, as well as sexualized identities.

In the case of Siri and Alexa, the feminine is remade (or better still: renegotiated) using familiar narratives about gender and sexuality. More to the point: the gendered programing of AI VA Siri and Alexa reify patriarchal stereotypes about the feminine in a new technological milieu characterized by distributed surveillant devices in the increasingly "smart" home.

In 2017, Amazon announced a new suite of smart devices to follow up the Amazon Echo and Dot. The devices included both cheaper and more luxe versions of the Echo, meant for every room in the house. The new devices represent an extension of Amazon's influence—and its data gathering—into their customers' lives. For the first time, the suite features devices with both screens and video cameras, including devices meant ideally for the closet or bedroom. The Echo Look, a small, pill-shaped device with a built-in camera and lighting system, is an example of this recent innovation in platform capitalism. Meant to assist users in making sartorial choices, the device caters especially to fashion-forward, tech-savvy, and financially-independent women. Like a good best friend, Alexa will provide a second-opinion on users' outfit, and help users go shopping for similar clothes on Amazon. Through the Look, the duplicity of AI VA's feminine persona is revealed and reified. For women, AI VA offer to assist with fashion, household management, and child-rearing. For (presumed heterosexual) men, AI VA invite sexual intimacy and provide companionship. All the while, these devices learn more about their users, their tastes, their lives.

The increasing proliferation of AI VA compels us to ask important questions about the relationship between technology and power, privacy and capital, gender and media. How much control should we give these devices, and the companies who produce them? Are we willing to reify normative gender roles in exchange for convenience? How should we treat

non-human objects with decidedly human qualities? What does it mean to be human, and according to whom? At what point does humanity—in all its messy, inefficient excesses—become redundant? Does the automation of labor and relationships free us from economic precarity, or does it lead us there more quickly?

The answers to at least some of these questions will be negotiated in the domestic sphere. David Limp, a senior vice president at Amazon and the head of the Echo line, describes Amazon's role in bringing about the future of modern domesticity: "Voice control in the home will be ubiquitous … . Kids today will grow up never knowing a day they couldn't talk to their houses" (Limp, as cited in Harris, 2017). Kids today will not just be talking to their houses, they will be talking to the virtual assistant who mediates their interaction with their homes. Meanwhile, those virtual assistants will be listening silently and collecting data for the corporations who made them. The smart home—as a site for technologically mediated domesticity—is no longer a distant dream or science fiction. The technology needed to make 24/7/365 surveillance a reality is already possible. Alexa, Siri, and the care labor they perform for customers will make that reality palatable.

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