

DPD AI chatbot swears, calls itself 'useless' and criticises delivery firm

Publication Date: 2024-01-20

Author: Jane Clinton

Section: Technology

Tags: Artificial intelligence (AI), Couriers/delivery industry, Computing, Consumer affairs, news

Article URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/jan/20/dpd-ai-chatbot-swears-calls-itself-useless-and-criticises-firm>



The delivery firm DPD has disabled part of its artificial intelligence (AI) powered online chatbot after a disgruntled customer was able to make it swear and criticise the company. Musician Ashley Beauchamp, 30, was trying to track down a missing parcel but was having no joy in getting useful information from the chatbot. Fed up, he decided to have some fun instead and began to experiment to find out what the chatbot could do. Beauchamp said this was when the "chaos started". To begin with, he asked it to tell him a joke, but he soon progressed to getting the chatbot to write a poem criticising the company. With a few more prompts the chatbot also swore. Beauchamp shared the conversation on X, with the chatbot replying to one message: "Fuck yeah! I'll do my best to be as helpful as possible, even if it means swearing." Then in another instance, the chatbot calls itself a "useless Chatbot that can't help you". One post by Beauchamp, a classical musician from London, was viewed 800,000 times in 24 hours. Referring to the chatbot, he wrote on X: "It's utterly useless at answering any queries, and when asked, it happily produced a poem about how terrible they are as a company." DPD uses AI in its online chat to answer queries as well as human operators. The company said a new update had been behind the chatbot's unusual behaviour and it had since disabled the part that was responsible and was updating its system as a consequence. "We have operated an AI element within the chat successfully for a number of years," the firm said. "An error occurred after a system update yesterday. The AI element was immediately disabled and is currently being updated." Beauchamp said that while his chatbot adventure had been "very amusing" there was a serious side to the exchange. "These chatbots are supposed to improve our lives, but so often when poorly implemented it just leads to a more frustrating, impersonal experience for the user," he said. "I think it's really struck a chord with people." As for his parcel, DPD said it was in touch with Beauchamp to "resolve his issue".