

Attention! Alexa and Siri are not real-life 'women in tech'!

 By Leigh Andrews

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There's been much outrage among the social media set this week - not just over the Cambridge Analytica scandal, but also over the severe lack of knowledge of female tech leaders...



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While there's no denying Alexa and Siri know most things, and even have a sense of humour, there's no getting around the fact that they're not people. So female-voiced they may be, but actual females they are not. Time for a quick history lesson...

Why Siri and Alexa sound female

AI like Apple's Siri, Amazon's Alexa, Microsoft's Cortana, Samsung's S Voice and Google Now will all respond to the question of whether they're female or not that they're in fact genderless as they're just computer programs.

And granted, you can now change Siri's accent, language, and gender. But according to [Wired](https://www.wired.com), Siri translates to "a beautiful woman who leads you to victory." But there is a real, live person behind the voice.

[TimesLive](https://www.timeslive.co.za) reports that Siri's voice is actually that of 50-something-year-old Atlantan Susan Bennett, who "spent the better part of several days in a recording studio" back in 2005.

“...repeating nonsensical phrases from which a body of vowels and consonants would be extracted, concatenated and reconstituted into a complete vocabulary.”

According to research by [The Mac Observer](https://www.themacobserver.com), the reason most AI is based on female voices is simple: A genderless voice is hard to achieve and Amazon and Microsoft's market research showed that men and women alike had a stronger preference for a AI using a female voice.

That's not to say these are the only 'females in the technology space', though. Far from it. In fact, Mashable reports that the first programmers weren't men, and the first computers weren't machines. Hello, *Hidden Figures*.



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That's what makes it all the more of a 'Wait, what?' reaction when I read through a [Fast Company](#) report on a new study from LivePerson. In the representative study, over 1,000 Americans were asked if they could name female tech leaders. First shock, only 8.3% said they could. Further shock? Over 4% of those named Alexa and Siri. Yes, as female tech leaders'.

Fast Company said it best:

“ ...That's 10 people [of 1,000] for whom the most famous woman in tech is a virtual assistant. ”

And that's a problem, especially as they were fast to trot out the expected list of top tech males: Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Elon Musk, and Mark Zuckerberg.

The legacy of true tech pioneers - yes, they happen to be female

What about [Ada Lovelace](#), considered the first computer programmer? Nasa 'computer' [Katherine Johnson](#), who plotted the flight paths of some of America's earliest space exploration expeditions? [Adele Goldberg](#), whose work inspired Steve Jobs' creation of the first Apple computer? Or [Angelica Ross](#), who ensured the technology industry is more inclusive than ever by advocating for transgender opportunities in tech?

(Yes, I'm ashamed to admit I had to [Google most of those fearless tech females](#).)

What is going on?

“ People were asked to name women tech leaders. They said “Alexa”, “Sir”:(. Of the 8.3% who said they could, only 4% actually could. If u care about equality & gender issues - please learn the names of women in tech.<https://t.co/Tev6PFRi92>— aileenlee (@aileenlee) [March 21, 2018](#) ”

“ [#MillennialAQuote](#) "Play it again , Alexa" <pic.twitter.com/A4e7jKqs6q>— Sammy (@HowWinMad3) [March 22, 2018](#) ”

There's a definite need to shake things up in the industry, especially where gender representation is concerned. The stats are not promising, as women's participation in the American technology industry dropped from 35% in 1990 to 26% in 2013. So those that are there are leaving.

And no, we don't need to 'pinkify' tech to make it more female-friendly. Female tech leaders do exist. [Patricia Baum Salgado suggests](#) that we need to reframe the issue to make it easier to discuss as it's a highly emotional, complex one.



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The more we get into it, the more it seems to stem from those gender stereotypes that are embedded from an early age. Let's do what we can to flip the script on that.

As I wrote back in 2016,

“ ...Gender-neutral toys would be a great stride and tangible intervention with the ability to become the catalyst of redefinition of the previously ‘accepted’ norms for what boys and girls should play with. Young children just see toys at an early stage of development – the notion that an object is meant for a girl or a boy specifically is the handed-down and recycled preconceptions of parents, retailers, or even marketers. ”



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So it's on all of us to change the status quo. Let's get the debate going, find out the true issues and start working to fix them.

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