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The Political Responses of Virtual Assistants

Virtual assistants, such as Amazon's Alexa or Apple's Siri, are quickly becoming features of everyday life, but little is known about their political responses. In this paper, I survey six virtual assistants and find that they typically have an above average knowledge of politics, an elementary understanding of important political concepts, and only a handful of opinions on important political issues. In follow-up interviews with tech workers, ranging from software engineers to executives, I discover that how companies craft responses to political questions is motivated in large part by economic considerations and that the future responses of these machines will likely create political echo chambers in which responses are highly customized to individual users. I conclude by discussing the implications of these findings for civics education and political polarization and by imploring social scientists to take seriously the idea that intelligent machines should be studied.