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A-HED

# Alexa, Stop Making Life Miserable for Anyone With a Similar Name!

Amazon's voice-controlled personal assistant is creating chaos for people called Alexis, Alex and Alexa; TV sitcom tried to order milk

By **JOANNA STERN**

Updated Jan. 26, 2017 1:53 p.m. ET

“Alexa, stop!” Joanne Sussman screamed in her living room.

Immediately, the computer living inside her Amazon Echo speaker stopped playing her favorite music station. Simultaneously, Mrs. Sussman's 24-year-old daughter, Alexa, froze on the stairs.

“What, mom? I'm taking the laundry down,” human Alexa shouted back. “What do you need?”

“I always liked my name, until Amazon gave it to a robot,” says Alexa Sussman, a recent New York University graduate who works in marketing.

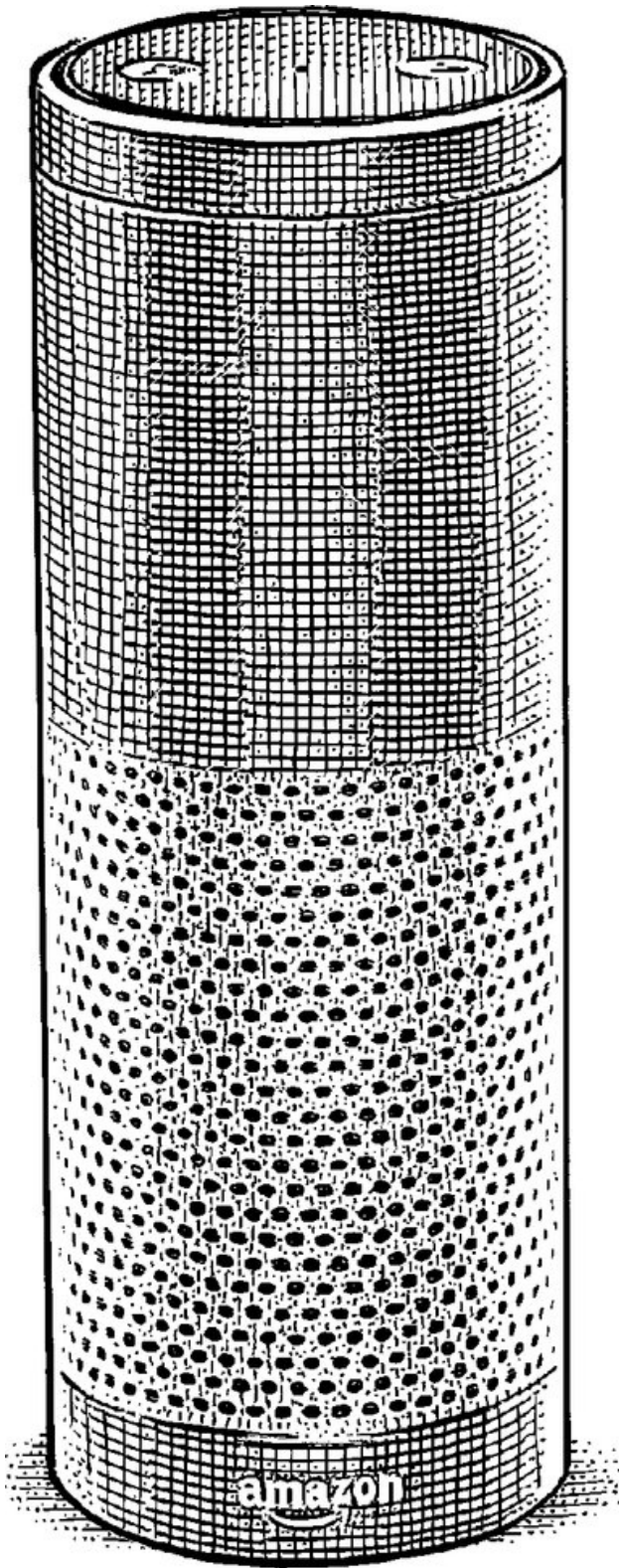
The artificial-intelligence invasion is upon us, in the form of disembodied personal assistants we can give orders to, query and, in some cases, try to converse with. In hopes of getting us used to our new artificially intelligent family members, the technology companies behind them have given the machines mostly female names to go with their soothing voices.

Apple Inc. picked “Siri.” Microsoft Corp. chose “Cortana.” (Alphabet Inc.'s Google opted to keep its software nonhuman, calling it “Assistant.”) Amazon.com Inc.'s choice, as it happens, was the 39th most popular girl's name in the U.S. in 2006. That means in some homes the plan has backfired: The effort to make a gadget more humanlike has earned it human enemies.

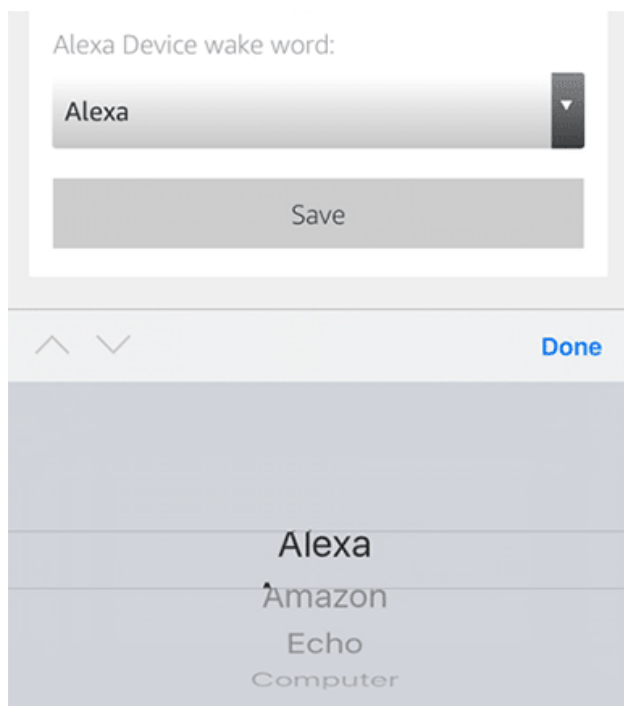
In the Sussmans' household in Levittown, N.Y., the confusion cuts both ways. Last week, when human Alexa's father, Dean, asked her to grab some water from the kitchen, Amazon's Alexa wanted to help, too. “Amazon's choice for water is Fiji Natural Artesian Water, pack of 24. It's \$27.27, including tax. Would you like to buy it?”

When he told his daughter to move the living-room chair, Amazon's Alexa yelped, “Ready to pair!” Robo-Alexa had a command for Mr. Sussman himself: “Go to the Bluetooth devices on your mobile device.”

The microphones in the \$180 Amazon Echo and the smaller \$50 Echo Dot are always listening for “Alexa,” which is their default “wake word,” the phrase causing it to start paying attention to commands. Amazon lets users change the wake word to “Echo,” “Amazon,” or, starting this week, “computer.”



Amazon Echo



In the Alexa smartphone app, you can change the Echo's wake word from "Alexa" to something else. PHOTO: AMAZON

But many users aren't aware. The Sussmans found out about the setting a year after buying the device. They have decided to keep "Alexa" because they say they find it funny.

Amazon has sold more than 11 million Echos and Dots since 2015, Morgan Stanley estimates, and it is working with partners to put Alexa into other products, including Ford Motor Co. cars and General Electric Co. lamps.

Some human Alexas want nothing to do with her.

"Oh, your name is Alexa, like the Amazon thing?" Alexa Duncan, 33, says she hears all too often these days. She refuses to buy the Echo.

Amazon says it named its Alexa after the ancient Egyptian Library of Alexandria. The company hasn't offered any formal apologies to the human Alexas.

The preference tech companies seem to have for female identities for their robots has left some people scratching their heads. Karl MacDorman, a professor at Indiana University who specializes in human-computer interaction, says part of the reason is that higher-frequency voices are easier to understand. Also, he says, "women are generally seen as more approachable, nurturing and, in some contexts, compliant."

Advances in artificial-intelligence techniques have made computers much better at understanding speech. Still, robots sometimes have trouble differentiating between their own names and similar ones.

Arlo Gilbert, 41, says Siri often gets confused when he speaks to his daughter, Sari. "Hey, Sari, dinner time!" results in a chorus of iPhone and iPad dings and Siri boasting that "this is what I found on the Web for dinner time." Mr. Gilbert decided to disable the "Hey Siri" wake word on all his devices to have a "functional life."

You don't even need to live with someone with a robot-likename to experience confusion.

Jordann Mitchell, 27, jumped across the room a few weeks ago when watching her new

## The Real-Life Alexa Struggle

Ever since Amazon's robot stole their names, life has been different



**Alexa Stott, 25**  
Raleigh, N.C.  
"Alexa will turn on a lot when we're playing board games. Someone will say, 'Alexa, it's your turn,' speaking to me. Then, of course, the Echo chimes in." *PHOTO: BEVERLY STOTT*



**Alexa Levine, 13**  
Glen Rock, N.J.  
"At least people finally don't get my name mixed up with the name Alexis anymore." *PHOTO: SILVER LAKE CAMP*



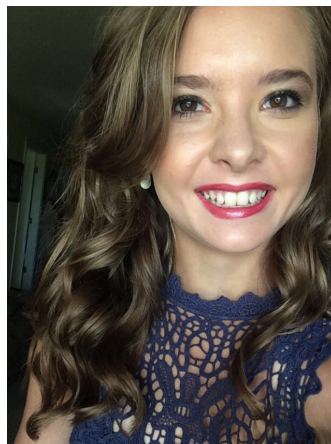
**Alexa Duncan, 33**  
Asheville, N.C.  
"The terrible irony of my situation is that I'm a librarian. My actual job is answering people's questions." *PHOTO: KRISTI HEDBERG*



**Alexa Marinis, 36**  
Cleveland, Ohio  
"My mom is not a fan of Amazon taking her baby's name and has submitted not one, but two, sternly written emails of disapproval to Amazon. I'm cool with it, though. Thanks to Amazon Echo, my name has become the modern equivalent of Ask Jeeves." *PHOTO: ALEXA MARINIS*



**Alexa Jones, 22**  
Las Vegas, Nev.  
"Yes, some of my family members treat me like I'm actually the Echo. 'Alexa, can you go get me something from the kitchen?' Funny at first, but now I need the craze to end." *PHOTO: ASHLYN ROBINSON*



**Alexa Blankenship, 16**  
Bragg City, Mo.  
"My family got four Amazon Echo Dots for Christmas. When someone wanted me, they'd whisper 'Human Alexa.' Finally, after a good three weeks, we figured out you could change the names of them." *PHOTO: ALEXA BLANKENSHIP*

favorite sitcom, "Schitt's Creek." Alexis, the main character on the Canadian show, was told by her dad to order 12 pints of milk. "The Echo lit up and I immediately started yelling, 'No, no, no!' Thank goodness she didn't order the milk," Ms. Mitchell says.

Amazon requires you to confirm a shopping order with a verbal "yes." In the Amazon Alexa smartphone app, Echo owners can additionally disable voice purchasing or enable a purchase confirmation code.

The Neitzel family learned that the hard way. Six-year-old Brooke Neitzel walked up to



Brooke Neitzel with the \$150 dollhouse and container of cookies she told Amazon's Alexa to order. PHOTO: MEGAN NEITZEL

the Echo on the kitchen counter while her parents were in the other room with their two sons. “Alexa, can you play dollhouse with me? Get me a dollhouse,” she asked her new robot friend. Two days later, a \$150 KidKraft Sparkle Mansion showed up at the Neitzel house in Dallas. They later donated it to a local hospital.

That story caught the attention of national news outlets. On Jan. 6, Brooke appeared on “Good Morning America” and explained to anchor Robin Roberts, “I told Alexa to order me a dollhouse and some cookies.”

Amazon Echoes and Echo Dots around the country started to perk up, including one in Allison Jeannotte’s kitchen in Boston. “My Alexa heard the clever girl on TV, lit up and said the most common search for a dollhouse was the KidKraft Sparkle mansion, would I like to buy it,” says Ms. Jeannotte.

Stephen Colbert, host of CBS’s “The Late Show,” has taken the TV-Alexa trick to new levels. In one of his monologues he tells Alexa to set a reminder to watch “The Late Show” every weekday, order a wood chipper with expedited shipping and read Pi to the 5 millionth digit. If an Echo or Dot is nearby, Alexa will, in fact, attempt some of those things.

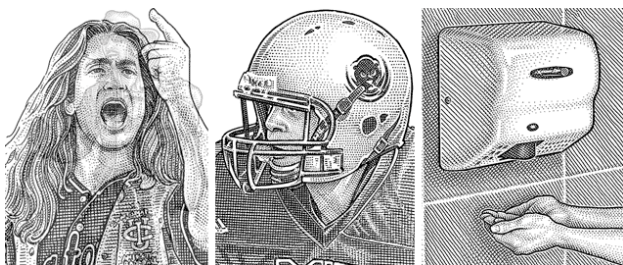
It shouldn’t be long before such devices have voice biometrics to determine if someone in the house is talking or it is on TV or the radio, says Robert Weideman, an executive vice president at Nuance Communications Inc., a voice-recognition company that provides the underlying technology for many voice assistants. The technology, which could also be used to recognize who in the house is talking, is already being deployed in the call systems at Barclays and USAA banks to determine that customers are who they say they are.



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Amazon's own television advertisements are known to wake Alexas from their sleep. Chris Berez, 36, of Manchester, N.H., is planning to move his Echo away from the TV because Alexa keeps blurting out, "I'm sorry, I don't understand the question" after hearing the advertisements.

An Amazon spokeswoman said the company is doing

technical work on its advertisements so that they don't awaken the Alexas.

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