February 2017

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Recommended Citation

Pelikan, Michael (2017) "Op Ed-Opinions and Editorials-Pelikan's Antidisambiguation-"Alexa, Read Me War and Peace"," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 29: Iss. 1, Article 12.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7711>

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Pelikan's Antidisambiguation — "Alexa, Read me War and Peace"

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Have you had occasion to converse with Alexa yet? In all of our continual, drawn-out arrival to "The Future," the current crop of digital assistants come pretty close to achieving a hallmark of that future we have been seeing in science fiction for decades.

"Computer," says Captain Kirk. It is very much like that. The capability is simply in the room and you address it directly. I am probably guilty of being a fan boy for Alexa. When the **Amazon** Echo was pre-released a few years back, I was among those who received an invitation to buy before general release. There was a price deal — half price — and the service's capabilities were in their infancy.

It was a little creepy at first, and it took a little while to sort out the facts surrounding the technology. Yes, the Echo is listening for its trigger word all the time, but no, it is not streaming the entire dialog in the room to the cloud, only a sentence that immediately follows the trigger word.

What you get in return for that tap into the cloud is access to all the cloud-based capabilities that the device connects you to.

These capabilities are under continual revision. In part, this is in the interest of chasing down bugs or unintended consequences.

In January, a San Diego television station originated a news report about a six year old girl in Dallas who had said to the Echo, "Alexa, buy me a dollhouse." It was a cute story. The little girl observed that her parents could order things from **Amazon** just by asking for them, so she tried it herself — and it worked!

The problem was that the San Diego TV station didn't think things through when they aired the report. The anchor quoted the little girl's words, and in every room with a TV that aired that report *that also had an Echo*, Alexa and heard the words, ordered a dollhouse.

I learned of this incident on the BBC, which prefaced its report by saying, "If you have an **Amazon** Echo, please turn it off now." They, at least, recognized that without that advisory, every follow-on report had the potential to trigger another dollhouse order.

It could have been worse. I hope the little girl got to keep her dollhouse.

In the realm of digital content, we have frequently heard about the similarities and differences between new and old media. Frequently cited as a potential benefit to digital "printed" media is the idea of continual revision. Nowhere is

this more evident than in Wikipedia. The idea of marrying the capabilities of a wiki with the purposes of an encyclopedia, in hindsight, was revolutionary.

Wikipedia formally launched in January 2001. (Oh my gosh, has it been that long already?) I well recall being intrigued by the idea, but figuring, wrongly, that its quality, breadth, and depth could never rival the great encyclopedias of the world. The thing I overlooked was, in fact, that notion of continual revision.

There was a story I'd grown up hearing about the Great Soviet Encyclopedia and its article about Lavrentiy Beria (yeah, it was an academic household — these were the sorts of stories we collected and traded).

I just looked it up in Wikipedia, and there it was, "Following the arrest and punishment of the infamous Lavrentiy Beria, the notorious head of the NKVD, in 1953 the encyclopedia — ostensibly in response to overwhelming public demand — mailed subscribers to the second edition a letter from the editor instructing them to cut out and destroy the three-page article on Beria and paste in its place enclosed replacement pages expanding the adjacent articles on **F. W. Bergholz** (an 18th-century courtier), the Bering Sea, and **Bishop Berkeley**."

My Dad used to laugh out loud about this story, "That was the most comprehensive encyclopedia article on the Bering Sea ever published!" It covered historical water temperatures, salinity, all selected and edited down to permit the new pages to be inserted seamlessly into the existing edition of the encyclopedia.

The Soviets understood the idea of a wiki, they just didn't need the Web to implement it.

As of now, Wikipedia has a monthly worldwide readership of 495 million, making it the sixth most popular website in terms of overall visitor traffic, with 117 million unique visitors in the United States alone. Now, these facts are drawn from Wikipedia's article entitled, "History of Wikipedia," but I'm willing to accept those figures as indicative of impact. As of 2015, Wikipedia's English language articles exceeded five million in number.

Are mechanisms and procedures in place to prevent political or ideological monkey business with the content of articles? This is, as ever, a work in progress. My sense is that as serious problems emerge they eventually attract attention and are eventually addressed, eventually

to be replaced by the next set of burning issues.

The fun comes when we start combining some of these resources and means of access. One of Alexa's tricks involves lookups in Wikipedia. If you say, "Alexa, Wikipedia [topic]," the Alexa service will do the topic lookup and read you the first part of the article. It won't read the entire article, but once it has stopped, you can say, "Tell me more," and it'll read the next part.

By all appearances, access to Alexa will spread. When we combine voice-accessed services with the content resources vended by **Amazon**, we see the basis for a genuinely vast content organization and delivery system. With the gradual hammering out of issues related to voice-delivered book content (automated and/or pre-recorded), it's not difficult to foresee new methods of access to and delivery of literature. Add in content from something like **Kahn Academy**, and we have voice-queried access to help with math problems. Link up to a search engine and we have voice-based access to anything that can be typed into a search box. Add in a few smart commands, such as "Send that article to me," and you could get extended results by email.

Now I need to stipulate that Alexa is by no means the only means of access to such capabilities. Siri's in the room, and I'm sure others are in the wings.

By the way, if this still all seems just too creepy, take a moment to look up some possibly reassuring examples of the stupidity of these devices. For example, type into Google, "alexa siri loop" for all sorts of examples of hijinks perpetrated by people who have time on their hands.

All this said, the prospects included in mashing up these capabilities are interesting. With a few smart Internet-of-Things appliances (switches, light bulbs, thermostats, etc.) in your home, you gain access to voice commanded device control. Then add mobile access to Alexa to that and we gain the ability to answer the age-old question, "Did I leave the porch light on?"

Maybe this is too much fan-boy-ism. That said, I confess to being intrigued by what happens when we take intellectual content and carry it across traditional boundaries between delivery media.

"Alexa, read me War and Peace" — doesn't that have a nice ring to it? Just the thing for that dreadful stretch between Scranton and Danbury...