Seek First to Regulate, Then to Understand: The Case for Preemptive Regulation of Robots

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Abstract : Robotics is a fast-evolving field lacking comprehensive and harm-mitigating regulation; it also lacks critical data on how human-robot interaction (HRI) may affect human psychology. As most anthropomorphic robots are intended as substitutes for humans, this paper asserts that the commercial robotics industry should be preemptively regulated at the federal level such that robots capable of embodying a victim role in criminal scenarios ("vicbots") are prohibited until clinical studies determine their effects on the user and society. The results of these studies should then inform more permanent legislation that strives to mitigate risks of harm without infringing upon fundamental rights or stifling innovation. This paper explores these concepts through the lens of the sex robot industry. The sexbot industry offers some of the most realistic, interactive, and customizable robots for sale today. From approximately 2010 until 2017, some sex robot producers, such as True Companion, actively promoted 'vicbot' culture with personalities like "Frigid Farrah" and "Young Yoko" but received significant public backlash for fetishizing rape and pedophilia. Today, "Frigid Farrah" and "Young Yoko" appear to have vanished. Sexbot producers have replaced preprogrammed vicbot personalities in favor of one generic, customizable personality. According to the manufacturer ainidoll.com, when asked, there is only one thing the user won't be able to program the sexbot to do – "...give you drama". The ability to customize vicbot personas is possible with today's generic personality sexbots and may undermine the intent of some current legislative efforts. Current debate on the effects of vicbots indicates a lack of consensus. Some scholars suggest vicbots may reduce the rate of actual sex crimes, and some suggest that vicbots will, in fact, create sex criminals, while others cite their potential for rehabilitation. Vicbots may have value in some instances when prescribed by medical professionals, but the overall uncertainty and lack of data further underscore the need for preemptive regulation and clinical research. Existing literature on exposure to media violence and its effects on prosocial behavior, human aggression, and addiction may serve as launch points for specific studies into the hyperrealism of vicbots. Of course, the customization, anthropomorphism and artificial intelligence of sexbots, and therefore more mainstream robots, will continue to evolve. The existing sexbot industry offers an opportunity to preemptively regulate and to research answers to these and many more questions before this type of technology becomes even more advanced and mainstream. Robots pose complicated moral, ethical, and legal challenges, most of which are beyond the scope of this paper. By examining the possibility for custom vicbots via the sexbots industry, reviewing existing literature on regulation, media violence, and vicbot user effects, this paper strives to underscore the need for preemptive federal regulation prohibiting vicbot capabilities in robots while advocating for further research into the potential for the user and societal harm by the same.

Keywords : human-robot interaction effects, regulation, research, robots