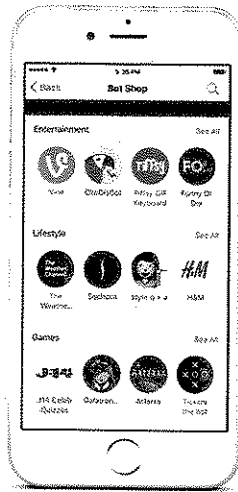


Artificial intelligence: Rise of the chatbots

The world's biggest tech companies believe the way we use the internet is about to undergo a major shift, said Sarah Halzack in *The Washington Post*. Facebook, Microsoft, Apple, Google, and Amazon are all convinced that the future of tech lies in chatbots—interactive software programs that converse with users to help them get information and buy products and services. Chatbot cheerleaders say this artificial-intelligence-powered technology will soon be our “primary digital gateway” to the web, the way that homepages once were and apps are today. As Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella recently put it: “Bots are the new apps.”

Chatbots have been around for a while—remember Clippy?—but recent advances in machine learning will help them “change everything about how you surf the web,” said Biz Carson in *BusinessInsider.com*. Instead of opening a weather app to see if you'll need an umbrella today, you'll just ask a bot. You might use one to order an Uber, buy new shoes, or check your flight status. Facebook is at the forefront of the chatbot charge, launching a platform last week that allows companies to develop bots within its Messenger app, which has 900 million global users. Big brands like Bank of America, eBay, and StubHub are already on board. Messaging app Kik, which has 275 million users—70 percent of them ages 13 to 24—launched its own bot platform in April. Sephora, H&M, and



Chatbots: The new apps?

Funny or Die all host bots there, helping users find products or clips from their favorite shows.

Don't get too excited, because “using these robo-assistants is like trying to talk politics with a toddler,” said Darren Orf in *Gizmodo.com*. The Hi Poncho weather bot in Messenger was utterly befuddled by even basic questions—“What's the weather like in Brooklyn this weekend?”—and its responses were gratingly robotic, no matter how many funny GIFs it tossed my way. Shopping bots aren't much better. I ordered a bouquet through the 1-800-Flowers bot in Messenger and found the options limited and the payment process confusing. Chatbots “will get better, but it's going to take time.” Until then, it's easier to get info and order stuff “the old-fashioned way”: through an app.

But people “are growing tired of individual apps,” said Mike Isaac in *The New York Times*. Though we're increasingly glued to our smartphones, we're spending most of that time in just a handful of messaging and social media apps. Big brands see chatbots as a way to better interact with customers. The question for Silicon Valley is whether chatbots in messaging services like Facebook's Messenger or Kik will win out over voice-controlled AI assistants like Apple's Siri or Amazon's Echo, which can act as a single, centralized helper for your life. Regardless of the victor, “the bot wave is coming.”