

Just like HAL, your voice assistant isn't working for you even if it feels like it is

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Space suits from the film 2001: A Space Odyssey on display at the Stanley Kubrick exhibition in LA. Credit: [Matthew J. Cotter, United Kingdom](#), [CC BY-NC-SA](#)

Of all the fictional virtual assistants we know from pop culture, few stand up to the original and perhaps most famous: the HAL 9000 from the 1968 Stanley Kubrick film 2001: A Space Odyssey.

We should probably be thankful for that. After all, Alexa may [shut your lights off](#), but she won't turn against you and wreak havoc on your life.

Or will she?

Amazon Alexa, Samsung Bixby, Google Assistant, Apple Siri, Microsoft's Cortana, IBM Watson and other virtual assistants are advertised as a [cross between your friend, your servant, your helpful companion and sidekick](#).

HAL presents us something more sinister, but perhaps more realistic. While tech companies push virtual assistants as [integral to a better, easier life](#), 2001: A Space Odyssey asks: at what cost?

The film illustrates the technological ecosystem companies are really competing to own – one where we trade in our privacy for small conveniences.

'I want to help you' – HAL

In 2001: A Space Odyssey, HAL is introduced to the crew of a spaceship as one of them. But with cognitive capabilities well beyond those of his human companions, HAL is omnipresent – and embedded in the technology keeping the crew alive.

The crew trust HAL, eschewing privacy for the sake of his aid in controlling the whole ship. It doesn't occur to them that the people who designed HAL might not have had the crew's best interests at heart. Or that HAL's loyalty is to Mission Control and, beyond that, his programming.

Likewise, although it is clear that the function of modern virtual assistants are driven by profit, it isn't obvious to the average consumer exactly how their presence is being monetised. Consumers may be more educated about their online privacy these days, yet the consequences of the virtual world intruding into the physical hasn't properly permeated

public consciousness.

Allowing a machine to record you 24/7 in exchange for convenience is a high price to pay. It might not seem that way because virtual assistants wear the halo of trust earned by the other services they are known for – Google's search is unparalleled and Amazon's retail experience leads the global marketplace.

Like HAL, these machines process incredible amounts of data. So much so, that even their creators are not quite sure of their capabilities, or how they will [reach their goal](#). The commercial benefit of virtual assistants lies in their ability to predict your behaviour through what they capture, and create opportunities for transactions. Mining big data for predictive analytics is [all the rage in the business world](#).

So, while companies are marketing [virtual assistants](#) as your "assistant", they are in fact your "analyst".

'I could see your lips move' - HAL

In 2001: A Space Odyssey, the crew clearly never read the HAL "Quick Start Guide". They didn't know he could lie, and they were also unaware he could read lips. When the crew steps out of the ship to have a moment of privacy, HAL's cameras could still see them and got the gist of their not-so-private conversation. Then push came to shove... and well, eventually the crew ended up getting the shove.

An unintended consequence of having a virtual assistant at our beck and call is that it is always listening, and it may also be recording. No surprise, [that's exactly what Amazon's been doing](#). If companies are recording you in your home, slip ups like [sending recordings to the wrong person](#), [unintentionally releasing information](#), or [accidentally allowing someone to listen in](#) are inevitable.

Oh, and if you believe you are protected by the terms and conditions, you are likely mistaken. But that's OK – like the 2001: A Space Odyssey crew, [you probably don't understand or read them anyway](#).

'I am afraid I can't do that, Dave' - HAL

Kubrick used 2001 to illustrate [technological, physical and psychological enslavement](#). HAL first controls the physical environment and then attempts to exert his control over the psychological one. If we re-imagine 2001: A Space Odyssey with HAL as the hero, then he's quite right to kill the [crew](#). After all, these pesky humans are unpredictable because they're likely to let their emotions mess up the mission.

If we re-imagine our lives with Google as the hero, well then we are the "assistant", helping Google get the data it needs to better monitor and predict your behaviour – for shareholders.

Luckily, humanity still has time to adjust before the machines fully take over our lives on behalf of [tech companies](#). As long as people still have their parrots [ordering food from Amazon](#) it will be clear to the public that trusting that machine may not be such a good idea.

Still, artificial intelligence improves at a rapid pace. Eventually we will have to decide if want consumer privacy to triumph, and blow the constant monitoring out of an airlock.

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