

Postertitel

What a Vision: The Artificial Companion?!

Six theses about the productivity of an ambiguous metaphor

Author

Dipl.-Soz. Knud Böhle, M.A.

Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (KIT)

Institut für Technikfolgenabschätzung und Systemanalyse (ITAS)

Postfach 3640

D-76021 Karlsruhe

Tel.: +49 721 608-22989

knud.boehle@kit.edu

Abstract

“Going Beyond the Laboratory” involves an important change in the discourse about a new technology as new actors get involved influencing the further steps of the targeted innovation processes. Especially actors from specific application fields, e.g. health care and education, and of course the public have an impact on the innovation trajectories when they contest, reject or just specify their demand towards a new technology. “Visions” and “metaphors” are important elements in communications, when a technology leaves the lab and approaches professional application fields and everyday life. The companion metaphor and the vision of “artificial companions” are especially relevant in the context of robots going beyond the lab. Based on prior analyses published in *Science, Technology & Innovation Studies*, Vol. 9, No 3 (2013) under the title „What a vision: The artificial companion. A piece of vision assessment including an expert survey”, the poster tries to provide six hypotheses for discussion related to the issue of the conference. The hypotheses are listed here in a short form:

1. In research-policy the techno-futuristic vision to build “artificial companions” is a technology-driven way to communicate a long-term orientation of research policy.
2. As “umbrella term” and “boundary object” the *artificial companion* is instrumental to bring about a new interdisciplinary field of research. The organizational impact of such terms is due to their ability to conceal differences of research goals and ambitions, e.g. between service robotics and social robotics.
3. The enormous range and the flexibility of the companion metaphor in ordinary language use allow for widespread use. In a wide sense, many things which accompany a person or which are present long-term in his or her personal environment and which are at the same time somehow useful are often termed companions. However, the companion metaphor, when used for interactive machines, is sometimes loaded with more and more properties once defining human beings (“personality”, “sociality” and “lifelikeness”).
4. Companion robots are service robots.
5. The companion metaphor is misleading and not adequate to describe and assess the state of the artefacts, which are actually developed.
6. The bolstered companion metaphor, notwithstanding, stimulates public discourse about this new technology – being thus a case of a productive misunderstanding. The appearance of humanoid companion robots as protagonists in movies as well as the widespread use of the metaphor in media reports and even textbooks is an indication that the “companion robot” has turned into a focal point of public debate.