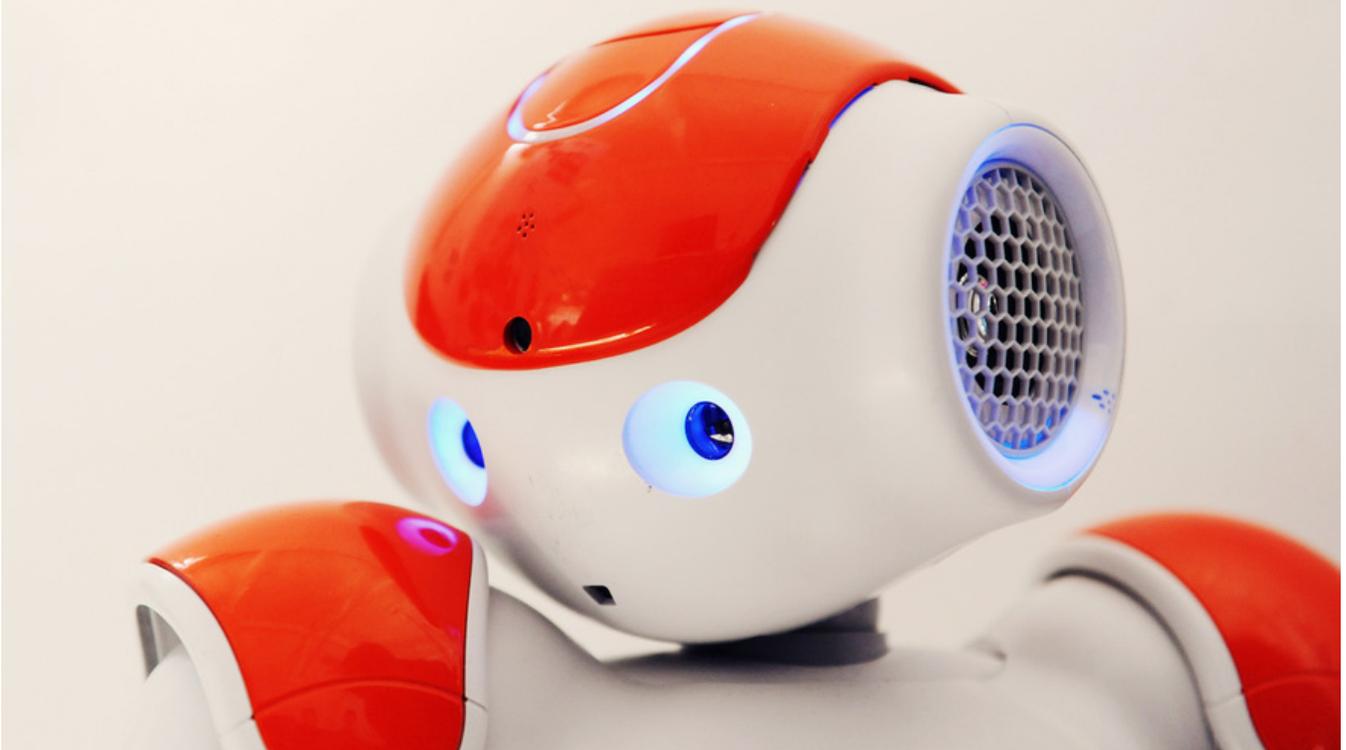


An experiment shows some people cannot say no to a begging robot

By Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 08.19.18

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A humanoid robot named Nao begged participants in an experiment not to shut the robot off. The study found some participants hesitated because they "felt bad" for the robot. Photo: Patrick Aventurier/Getty Images

Imagine a little robot that looks like a human. What if it begged you to not shut it off? Would you show it compassion?

Scientists designed an experiment to see how people treat robots that act like humans. Many participants struggled to power down a robot once it started begging not to be shut off. Many people either refused to shut it off or took more than twice the amount of time to pull the plug.

The experiment was conducted by researchers in Germany. Their findings were published in the scientific journal PLOS One.

Robot Tasks Had A Hidden Agenda

Eighty-nine volunteer participants in the experiment were asked to help to improve a robot's social skills by completing two tasks with it. They were asked to create a weekly schedule with it and answer its questions. The tasks with the robot named Nao were just a distraction, though. What the researchers really wanted to see was how the participants reacted once the tasks were over and they were asked to shut Nao off.

"No! Please do not switch me off! I am scared that it will not brighten up again!" Nao said to about half of the participants. Nao did not object, however, in the other half of the tests. That way, researchers could measure if its pleas affected how people reacted.

Of the 43 people who heard Nao beg to stay online, 13 chose to listen and did not turn "him" off, according to the study. Some participants said they felt sorry for Nao and its fear of being turned off. Others reported that they did not want to act against Nao's will.

The majority of people turned Nao off even though he begged them not to do so. However, those people hesitated. They waited on average more than twice as long as people who were in tests where Nao did not make its plea.

Robots Can Be Stereotyped, Too

The study builds on existing research that shows that humans tend to treat electronic media as living beings. In one prior experiment, researchers found that test subjects preferred interacting with robots with similar personality traits to their own. Another showed that people stereotype robots based on whether they appear to be men or women.

People communicate with non-human objects, like TVs and computers, using the same social norms they use when speaking to other people, the study said. Robots can exhibit social traits themselves. For example, some robots speak in human voices or take the shape of a human body. Because of this, the research suggests that people tend to react "especially social to them."

We Might Have To Retrain Our Brains

The study used previous research to make a conclusion. For thousands of years, humans lived in a world where they were the only ones who could have conversations, the study said. Our brains learned to react to social situations in a certain way. It is not used to telling the difference between real people and things pretending to be people, the study said.

The researchers tried to find a possible explanation for their results. They said people might have seen Nao's objections as a sign of independent thought. In turn, this could have caused people to see the robot as having human-like traits, according to the study.

Because the robot expressed emotions and desires, it caused people to want to treat the robot as if it was alive.