United Nations rolls out humanoid robots for questions at Geneva conference

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A United Nations technology agency assembled a group of robots that physically resembled humans at a news conference, inviting reporters to ask them questions in an event meant to spark discussion about the future of artificial intelligence.

The nine robots were seated and posed upright along with some of the people who helped make them at a podium in a Geneva conference centre for what the UN's International Telecommunication Union billed as the world's first news conference featuring humanoid social robots.

Among them: Sophia, the first robot innovation ambassador for the UN Development Program, or UNDP; Grace, described as a health care robot; and Desdemona, a rock star robot. Two, Geminoid and Nadine, resembled their makers.

Organisers said the AI for Good Global Summit event was meant to showcase the capabilities and limitations of robotics and how those technologies could help the UN's sustainable development goals. The media event featured introductions from the robots' companions or creators and a round of questions to the robots from reporters.

And while the robots vocalized strong statements — that robots could be more efficient leaders than humans, but wouldn't take anyone's job away or stage a rebellion — organizers didn't specify to what extent the answers were scripted or programmed by people.

The summit was meant to showcase "human-machine collaboration," and some of the robots can produce preprogrammed responses, according to their documentation.

The UNDP's Sophia, for example, sometimes relies on responses scripted by a team of writers at Hanson Robotics, the company's website shows.

Reporters were asked to speak slowly and clearly when addressing the robots, and were informed that time lags in responses would be because of the internet connection and not the robots themselves. That didn't prevent awkward pauses, audio problems and some stilted or inconsistent replies.

Popular tech products such as Apple's Siri have used speech recognition technology to respond to simple human queries for over a decade. But last year's release of ChatGPT, a chatbot with a strong command of the semantics and syntax of human language, has triggered worldwide debate about the rapid advancement of AI systems.