Chapter 4

Mecha-Media: How Are Androids, Cyborgs, and Robots Presented and Received Through the Media?

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ABSTRACT

How are robots, androids and cyborgs presented and received in the media? This chapter applies a social media analysis to this question by using empirical research on news stories that feature robotic technologies to see how robots are presented, consider what reporters focus on when writing about robots, and review how the public discusses and receives robots. The theoretical framework utilised focuses on how robot narratives are framed, how robot controversies are presented in different media, and how robots are domesticated through the media. The two main cases are a “robot hotel” in Japan, and a “killer robot” at a Volkswagen factory in Germany. News coverage of both stories shows widely differing ways for how the robot-narrative is framed.

INTRODUCTION

The term “robot” has been around for quite some time, with deep roots in fictional works. Since entities such as androids and cyborgs have entered the discourse, there is a need to analyze how these “non-human human-lookalikes” are portrayed. This chapter does so by a media-analysis which gives expression on how robots are portrayed, and how they are received. The portrayal of robots will be analyzed.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-2973-6.ch004
by media-analysis strategies, tackling the who, what, where, and how, of concrete news-articles on robots. The analysis on how robots are *received* will utilize research techniques that analyse some new social media applications and comment fields found on the Internet. By analyzing public opinions seen in comment fields - tweets regarding shows where robots are found; e.g., on Facebook groups and forums discussing robots - the author will qualitatively explore ways the general public receives robots.

In addition to the two focus areas of portrayal and reception, a thorough background will be given for each empirical sample on search terms, frequency, statistics, and background information on the given media. The media analysis will cover news articles from 2015, focusing primarily on articles written in English, originating from Europe and the US, but also with focus on robots in Japan. All three of these regions are robot hotspots in terms of production and/or consumption, with Japan being the primary producer of robots, and until recently the top consumer. In 2016, China surpassed Japan in the number of robot units bought per year. The US and EU represent the two largest economies in the world affecting the money flowing into robotic research. However, they are, along with Japan, troubled by an increasingly aging population. Robots are seen as one possible solution to combat this problem.

Different robots are presented in different ways, and the presentation varies, not only between robots, but also between countries. Simply put, robots are presented very differently by the media in the US, Europe, and Japan. This is perhaps tied to “homegrown” robots; i.e., Japanese robots might be better presented and received in Japan than American ones, and vice-versa.

While many articles written about robots are quite positive, focusing on how new robotic technology can benefit mankind, there are also critical voices. The interesting thing in the portrayal of robots is not only the actual context the robot is reported to perform in, but also the multiple critical stories in the media regarding what robots can be capable of with present new technology. This matter is heavily tied to cultural contexts, and with an analysis of the media presentation and reception of robots, can be further investigated.

The research for this chapter is methodologically founded in *Grounded Theory*, which is an inductive theory-building method (Charmaz & Smith, 2003; Glaser & Strauss, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Grounded Theory starts with data, and follows it, seeing whom it touches and how, and it then builds the theory on the basis of the empirical data collection. The strength of the Grounded Theory method is that it enables us to not “blind ourselves” with theory before searching for the data. In a media context, this can be especially fruitful, as the author is primarily concerned with the way the data is presented and received, and not how it can fit into existing theoretical frameworks.
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