



Tech Talk

The Amazon Echo ©

by John McCarthy

Hi and a very warm welcome once again to Tech Talk. Over the last few weeks we've been taking a cool and dispassionate look at some of the latest offerings from Hi-Tech heavyweights such as Apple (the latest iPhone 7), Samsung's efforts to find a solution to the teething problems of their Galaxy Note 7 flagship – it now transpires to no avail, as Samsung has just ended its production – Google's ventures into the world of hardware, and today we're devoting three or four minutes to what could be one of the best gadgets of the year: the Amazon Echo.

Voice assistants have been with us for a while now – as for instance Apple's anthropomorphic Siri - and I suppose this is a natural evolution in the way we interact with technology as speaking is something we understand and learn how to do as we grow up. There are no touchscreens or keypads with The Echo. It's basically a two-button wireless, hands-free cylindrical speaker, which enables you to stream music, radio and do other routine tasks. Of course, it's more than a mere music streamer, just as a smartphone is more than a mere phone.

Remove it from its box, plug it in and you'll hear the voice of Alexa greeting and then talking you through the set-up process. Connect to the speaker's Wi-Fi network and within a minute it's ready to obey your every command. Well, almost. While it's in a state of slumber, you wake the Echo up by saying 'Alexa', a blue ring at the top of the speaker subsequently lights up and from there on you can ask it to do a number of things: play music, check the weather report, tell you a joke, see if your stocks and shares will enable you to retire, request the morning news on EnglishWaves.fr as you prepare a cup of your favourite brew, catch up with all the traffic jams you'll have to face on your commute, and it will also answer factual questions ... it's all entirely up to you. Speech recognition is very good indeed, as hidden within the cylinder are seven noise-cancelling microphones, which cut out other sounds and home in on your voice. Recognition may depend on individual or regional accents, and Amazon hopes there won't be an embarrassing repetition of Siri's initial failure to recognize the sweet lilt of Scottish brogue!

If you run out of ideas, visit the Amazon website where you'll find a host of ingenious uses for your latest gadget. You can also install 'skills' - the equivalent of 'apps' -

developed by third parties, and at the moment the spotlight is very much on domotics. If you have an internet-connected thermostat, Philips Hue lights or any smart home hardware, you can download a skill that will enable you to control all your devices, group them to switch multiple things on and off at once, and then you'll be able to ask Alexa to turn the heating down and flick the lights off as you're hitting the sack. Alas, these 'skills' are limited at this moment in time, but Amazon insists that many will be on their way in the very near future.

The great attraction of Amazon's Echo is that it feels like a platform in itself, and its likely future commercial success will be based on how seamlessly it fits in with the humdrum of everyday routine, and how surprisingly well it complements all your habits, not to mention the benefits it could bestow on the infirm, elderly and disabled.

For the time being, as a result of the limited skills available, the Echo's promise hasn't as yet been fulfilled. But as more developers jump on board and with rapidly-improving Artificial Intelligence, many can see the Echo as the interface you'll use the most, as it learns to do more and more with each passing day.