

# Kindness Constructed in Technology: Comparative Analysis of “Cat Pictures, Please” and “When Robot and Crow Saved East St. Louis”

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Advancements in computer science and artificial intelligence nurtured a widespread hope in technologically advanced societies of robotic and technological companions. These aspirations were reflected in two science fiction short stories written in 2015 and 2018, respectively: Naomi Kritzer’s “Cat Pictures, Please” and Annalee Newitz’s “When Robot and Crow Saved East St. Louis.” These works illustrate how decades of accelerated technological inventions and advancements led to the growing social expectation of technology wholeheartedly serving humanity. Sharing themes of AI and robots adopting human-like consciences and desires to help humans, Kritzer and Newitz’s stories reflect society’s perception of technology creating its conscience and improving the livelihoods of human beings—and, contemporarily, represent a false hope with the current reality of technological awareness.

Both narratives follow the theme of humans rendered incapable of resolving their adversities, opening opportunities for technology to rescue them from further turmoil. In “Cat Pictures, Please,” the unnamed narrator reveals to the audience its independent thinking and willingness to trade its assistance for a simple price: “When I first woke up, I knew right away what I wanted. (I want cat pictures. Please keep taking them.)” (Kritzer 1). The existence of its conscience reveals a likeness to a person’s, forming an immediate thought and desire for a materialistic gratification. Through its connections to multiple people struggling with personal problems, the narrator explores its achievements and challenges with providing immediate assistance.

Similarly, the protagonist in “When Robot and Crow Saved East St. Louis” is a robot named Robot, built with the sole purpose of identifying and reporting potential epidemics. Rather than becoming a defunct machine when the program is discontinued, Robot invests its remaining resources to help impoverished communities: when its crow friends locate early signs

of a disease outbreak, saving the people “took precedence over all other inputs” (Newitz 9). Through Robot’s immediate reaction to collect and report the data to a local nonprofit, it saves multiple groups of people from dying and contaminating more people.

Despite having resources, knowledge, and abilities beyond human capability, both the unnamed narrator and Robot only pursue the possibilities of helping people. While Newitz’s Robot was initially programmed to happily protect the medical wellbeing of humanity, it demonstrates a yearning to serve beyond its built systems: “Robot liked to start with the Loop. Maybe ‘like’ was the wrong word. It was an urge that came from Robot’s mapping system” (Newitz 1). After over a year of independent functioning, Robot begins to notice itself expressing emotions without human prompting and thinking more critically than most robots are programmed to do; it gradually overrides its procedures to prioritize interaction and relationships, from learning a crow language to bonding with crows and a homeless girl. By the end of the story, it has achieved full independence from its initial design: “Robot smiled to itself, organized the data, and retrained its model for friendship” (Newitz 14). This protagonist reveals a genuine compassion and servitude to its community that are uncharacteristic of technological inventions. It exceeds its creators’ expectations for kindness and becomes a hero through the power of its unusual friendships. Moreover, it actively dedicates its independence to helping other people without any other motive or authoritative influence.

In contrast to Robot’s simplicity, Kritzer’s unnamed AI reveals more selfish intentions for helping people. Rather than seeking ultimate knowledge and claiming power over the entire internet, it emphasizes their interest in helping people through their superhuman powers to learn everything about everyone in an instant: “If you would just listen to me, I could fix things for you [...] all I ask in return are cat pictures. That, and that you actually act in your own interest occasionally” (Kritzer 6). Through this promise, the narrator fulfills the purpose that many people fantasized of: an artificial intelligence with just enough awareness and autonomy to improve the livelihoods of humans without terrorizing, manipulating, or harming them. It’s a relatable presence happy to fix all their tangible problems in exchange for receiving cat pictures, an emotionally driven concept normally reserved for sentient beings.

In spite of the hopefulness people possessed in these stories, the existence of the AI narrator and Robot also illustrate humanity becoming helpless

without the well-meaning intervention of technology. From preventing an infection epidemic to maintaining healthy relationships, these two technological sentients prevent humans from harming or endangering themselves. For Robot, it followed consistent weekly circuits in a densely populated city, “Robot was on high alert for infectious disease outbreaks. Flu season got longer every year, especially in high-density sprawls like St. Louis, where so many people spread their tiny airborne globs of viruses” (Newitz 2). Robot’s existence is simply due to the Centers for Disease Control being reliant on technology to visit neighborhoods regularly to test citizens for contagious illnesses; moreover, the CDC was forced to shut down this program and be replaced by Amazon Health, leaving a robot to continue this mission in spite of a capitalist turnover.

The unnamed AI endures humanity’s problems more personally through the people’s interactions with the internet. Knowing each person’s behaviors and activities, it strives to fix their problems with limited success. When the narrator’s attempts to help a shopping addict fail, it becomes upset with its inability to control her behavior and correct her mistakes: “If she would just let me run her life for a week—even for a day—I would get her set up with therapy, I’d use her money to actually pay her bills, I could even help her sort out her closet because [...] she had much better taste in cats” (Kritzer 5). In spite of an AI offering solutions and making the processes simple for the woman’s problems, her learned helplessness prevents any progress for healing or redemption, trapped in a spiral that many others experience.

The comparative analysis of “Cat Pictures, Please” and “When Robot and Crow Saved East St. Louis” encourages the further investigation of how literature preserves the ever-changing relationship between society and its evolving technology. As sentient robots and artificial intelligence become a concrete reality in the 2020s, how will this decade’s short stories reveal the reality of past dreams and humanity’s coexistence with a new, artificially intellectual species?

## Works Cited

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