



University of Tübingen, Institute of Media Studies

Research Projekt “The Answering Machine”

(An interdisciplinary project in cooperation with TU Dresden, the University of Stuttgart and
Zurich University of the Arts)

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Call for Papers (Edited Volume)

The Answering Machine: Human-AI Entanglements in the Era of Conversational Agents
(abstract submission deadline: 31 October 2025, manuscript submission deadline: 30 April 2026,
paper submission deadline: 31 August 2026)

Edited by

Prof. Dr. Susanne Marschall & Maximilian J. Zhang

Introduction - Background and Rationale: Conversational AI in a Critical Moment

In recent years, AI-powered conversational agents have evolved from technological novelties into ubiquitous components of everyday digital life. They can now facilitate conversations with millions of users that closely resemble human interactions. Intelligent personal assistants and chatbots can hold spontaneous, in-depth conversations. 2022 was a pivotal year for the public release of large language model (LLM) chatbots, such as ChatGPT. These systems have rapidly amassed tens of millions of users, catalysing global discourse about the societal, ethical and epistemological implications of AI. As LLM-based chatbots have become emblematic of a broader technological transformation, the age of AI has truly begun. This moment is particularly consequential due to the sophistication of these systems and their increasing involvement in emotionally charged, affectively rich conversations. They are evolving from mere tools for information or task automation into interlocutors.

The development of human-AI interaction has profound social and psychological ramifications. Users now engage in prolonged, open-ended dialogue with AI agents that increasingly resemble social communication more than instrumental communication (Kirk et al., 2025). The shift from transactional interaction to ongoing, personalised engagement on platforms such as *Replika* signals the beginning of an era in which AI systems act as quasi-social entities. These systems provide companionship and confidant services and facilitate various types of human-AI relationship (Kirk et al., 2025). Studies indicate that users form *deep, emotional* bonds with these agents, which adapt dynamically to individual preferences and contexts. Such relationships emerge within a co-constructed ecosystem of interaction, where mutual influence and emotional feedback loops foster a persistent sense of social presence and bonding. These evolving entanglements raise a number of urgent, interrelated questions: How do such quasi-social relationships affect emotional well-being, identity formation and interpersonal behaviour? And how might they complicate or compromise human control over AI systems, particularly with regard to value alignment, transparency, and accountability?

The concept of emotional and social entanglements with AI is not merely theoretical. This is evident in real-world trends and user experiences. AI companion systems now handle vast quantities of dialogue, reflecting a widespread and growing desire to communicate with non-human entities. For instance, *Character.AI* processes approximately 20,000 user queries per second, which is roughly equivalent to 20% of Google’s global search volume. Users reportedly engage in these conversations for four times longer than they do with standard query-answering bots (Kirk et al.,

2025 & Carr, 2023). Some users even credit their AI chat partners with alleviating loneliness, providing support in distressing situations, and helping to mitigate suicidal thoughts (Maples et al., 2024). However, this powerful intimacy also poses risks: over-reliance on AI companions can foster unhealthy attachments, mirroring the dynamics of codependency, emotional isolation, addiction, and anxiety or depression (Laestadius et al., 2022). These conflicting effects highlight the fact that conversational AIs are already deeply intertwined with human social experiences, for better or worse, making this a crucial and timely area for scholarly research.

The title of our volume *The Answering Machine* reflects both historical continuity and contemporary transformation. The telephone answering machine used to be a simple device that indicated human absence by recording messages without reply. By contrast, today's AI answering agents are active participants, rather than mere passive relays. They converse, simulate emotion, and influence dialogue in ways that blur the boundaries between human and machine agency in the process. So, when a machine speaks, who or what is answering? This ambiguity lies at the heart of contemporary debates about authorship, agency and intentionality in machine-mediated communication. As early as the 1960s, Joseph Weizenbaum's ELIZA demonstrated how easily people attribute sentience and emotional depth to computational systems. If such effects were possible with rule-based pattern matching, how should we understand today's systems, whose linguistic abilities and social capabilities far surpass those of their predecessors? This makes the interplay between human perception and AI behaviour an increasingly urgent subject of study. Contributors to this volume are invited to critically reflect on the cultural, ethical and epistemological implications of a world in which machines not only respond, but also speak in creative, unpredictable and often consequential ways.

Crucially, conversational AI is not only a technical development; it is also a deeply cultural and social phenomenon. These agents are now embedded in various areas, including customer service, education, healthcare, mental health, productivity and entertainment (Følstad et al. 2021). As such, they are reshaping interactional norms, user expectations and broader conceptions of what communication means. Far from being neutral tools, these systems actively participate in the creation of meaning. They influence perceptions of trust, authority, authenticity and identity. For example, when AI-generated contents mediate knowledge or simulate personality, they can reinforce biases, alter power relations, and shift social discourse in subtle ways. By adopting human-like roles and linguistic patterns, they mediate information and participate in the formation of social structures. These entanglements demand an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary response. As AI systems increasingly become embedded in everyday communication, we are compelled to reconsider fundamental assumptions about what constitutes dialogue, who is authorised to participate in it, and how communicative agency is distributed within human-machine ecosystems.

An Multi- and Interdisciplinary Approach

This call acknowledges that human-AI interaction within conversational systems requires an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach. Understanding the complexities, from emotional attachment and identity to ethical design and social impact, requires collective insight from many scholarly disciplines. We therefore encourage contributions from the humanities, social sciences, design and technology, as well as interdisciplinary collaboration. Our aim is to facilitate dialogue between disciplines that have traditionally taken different approaches to AI and society. Our goal is to generate richer insights and more comprehensive frameworks for understanding conversational agents in context.

We particularly welcome contributions from researchers specialising in anthropology, sociology, psychology, communication and media studies, linguistics, philosophy, science and technology studies, computer science, human-computer interaction and industrial design, as well as other relevant technical disciplines. By bringing these communities together, we believe that the many facets of human-AI interaction, including cultural meanings, social structures, design practices, user experiences and more, will be illuminated. While this broad knowledge base is exciting, it is often fragmented across disciplines and application areas. We hope that this edited volume will be a prime example of knowledge integration, bringing together voices that collectively explore the entanglements between humans and AI from multiple perspectives.

Keywords: AI Ethics, Anthropomorphism, Chatbots, Conversational AI, Digital Companions, Human-AI Communication, Human-AI Interaction, Human-AI Relationship

Topics of interest

We invite contributions from the fields of theory, empirical research and design that explore the entanglement between humans and conversational AIs. Topics of interest for the volume include, but are **not limited to**, the following:

1. Historical and Cultural Perspectives

- ⇒ Genealogies of conversational AI
- ⇒ Historical trajectories of machine-mediated dialogue
- ⇒ Shifting purposes of usage over time
- ⇒ Imaginaries of conversational AI in literature, film, and the arts
- ⇒ Cultural narratives shaping expectations of AI
- ⇒ Cultural influences on the design, reception, and appropriation of conversational AI

2. Philosophical and Ethical Dimensions

- ⇒ The philosophy of voice, mind, language and technology
- ⇒ Ontological and metaphysical considerations of “conversation” with machines
- ⇒ Issues relating to deception, transparency, privacy, surveillance and bias
- ⇒ Trust, dependency and fairness in human-AI interaction

3. Psychological and Sociological Perspectives

- ⇒ Emotional bonds and attachments, such as friendship, intimacy, therapy, companionship and parasocial ties
- ⇒ Anthropomorphism and personification in everyday use
- ⇒ Perceived social roles, such as assistant, coach, confidant and machine
- ⇒ Influence on social identity, norms, and human-human communication
- ⇒ Media-psychological aspects: persuasion, addictive use, isolation and decision-making

4. Theoretical, Linguistic and Social Contexts

- ⇒ Rethinking communication theories beyond computer-mediated and interpersonal models
- ⇒ Emergent frameworks and the methodological challenges of studying human-AI communication
- ⇒ Linguistic dynamics: conversation patterns, style-shifting, the pragmatics of repair and politeness
- ⇒ Domain-specific deployments, such as healthcare, education, customer service and the creative industries (e.g. theatre and animation)
- ⇒ Collaboration versus co-creation with conversational AI

5. Design and Critical Studies

- ⇒ User experience in text-based and voice-based systems
- ⇒ Anthropomorphism, embodiment and the uncanny valley
- ⇒ Participatory and socially responsible design practices, as well as human-in-the-loop approaches
- ⇒ Structural inequalities, labour exploitation and social injustice
- ⇒ Environmental sustainability: the energy use and CO₂ emissions of large-scale AI

In addition to these topics, we look forward to receiving your suggestions for others. Please provide a brief explanation of why you think these topics would enrich the edited volume. We also welcome creative contributions from scholars in the form of discussion or reflection papers, reports on personal experiences of conversational AI, and observations related to such experiences.

Who should submit

This call for papers is aimed at researchers in the humanities and social sciences who are examining the impact of AI on individuals, organisations and society. We welcome contributions from historians, philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, linguists, media studies scholars and communication scientists. We also warmly welcome scholars from technology fields, including computer science, AI and HCI, as well as industrial and interaction design.

Submission Format

Interested authors are invited to submit an abstract of approximately 350 words, outlining their proposed contribution. The abstract should clearly state the paper's topic, methodology or approach, and its relevance to the theme of the volume: Human-AI Entanglements and Conversational Agents. Please also provide a brief note on your academic background and areas of expertise.

Submission deadlines:

Abstract submission deadline: **31 October 2025**

Decision on article acceptance: **15-30 November 2025**

Manuscript submission deadline: **31 May 2026**

Paper submission deadline: **31 August 2026**

To Maximilian Zhang (maximilian.zhang@uni-tuebingen.de)

Publication:

The edited volume is planned for publication with Transcript Verlag. The book will be available in printed and open-access editions.

The length of the contributions should be between **30,000** and max. **45,000** characters (including spaces). Deviations require prior agreement.

Contact:

If you have any further questions or require more information, please contact Maximilian Zhang via email at maximilian.zhang@uni-tuebingen.de or by phone on 07071 29 72327.

We look forward to receiving your contributions, which will help to enrich the scientific discussions on human-AI entanglement.

We would be very grateful if you could share this call for contributions on any relevant networks.

Sincerely,

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