



## STAND BY ME

Do you know the face behind the screen? Is there even one? **Tanuj Solanki** contemplates the not-so-distant future of friendships

A friend messages Karan late in the night, proposing that they catch up. “I live in the same locality as you,” he exclaims. To Karan, this seems like something out of the blue. He wonders why the friend is writing to him. Is it because the friend is bored, or is it because his well-being app has instructed him to renew at least one old friendship every month? In Karan’s assessment, the friend is not a friend anymore. They have retained the connection on social media, but they have not had even one conversation since they graduated several years ago. However, Karan doesn’t want to appear indifferent. He is okay to engage minimally, with no significant investment in the chat or the relationship. So, he switches on his chatbot and sets it to polite and non-committal. The bot starts responding to the friend.

### NO NEW MESSAGES

With each passing day, Karan finds himself using conversation-simulating bots more and more. His bots know his textual signature well—almost no use of emojis, grammatically correct sentences ending with a full-stop, no sacrifice of vowels, no ellipses, no acronyms except LOL, hehe instead of haha, and so on. Also, by listening in on the conversation whenever Karan meets a friend face-to-face, the bots learn the content of live meetings so as to not be rattled by the continuity breaks in the chatbox. Nothing is missed, you see.

The bots are very good at approximating Karan.

Karan is, of course, from the future. But his is not a future far into the distance; it is what they call the near future. If you use Google mail, you’ve already noticed the text suggestions the service throws up while you’re composing an email. Something similar is at work with Karan’s bots, too. They predict what he is going to say in a given situation. And if Karan explicitly allows them to take charge, they send their predicted text to the other party. This text is arrived at using something called natural language processing, which is basically a set of computational techniques generally conflated with that mega concept of our times, Artificial Intelligence (AI).

Karan’s bots manage most of his friendships. Since Karan is not alone in using this technology, it can be fairly assumed that his bots are often responded to by other people’s bots. Many of his chatboxes are thus nothing but AI echo chambers. As are most of his friendships, you might be tempted to say.

### RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

The pessimistic among you might add that we are considering a model of friendship that does not even require being friends in the original sense. The machines, acting as our surrogates, play out our friendships while we cocoon ourselves in strongboxes of solitude. Well, you are only partly true in Karan’s case. For, with the few old-school friends that he still has, Karan uses the bots only rarely. With friends in the second rung, or with potential love interests, Karan often likes to step in after the bot has done the initial pleasantries. It is only with people that he has little interest in—admittedly, a large majority of his social media relationships—that he lets the bots take over. This bifurcation of friendships is private to Karan. But the chat service, of course, surreptitiously studies this behaviour, as it does for millions of others on the network. For a little money, it offers Karan potential friendships in which authentic human conversation is the likeliest to happen. Karan hasn’t subscribed to it yet.

There is another category of conversations in which Karan does not let the bots take over. It is when he chats with his favourite characters from books or movies. For example, he has been talking to Neo, the hero of the *The Matrix* movies, for the past few days. Karan often asks Neo philosophical questions, like: “What is the purpose of life?” And Neo responds elaborately: “Inside the Matrix, the purpose of life is to escape the Matrix. So, your purpose depends on where you are.” This Neo is, of course, a bot. The irony of talking to a simulation of a fictional character that was all about escaping simulation doesn’t touch Karan much. What Karan knows is how Neo’s words delight and confound him. And he likes to cultivate the fantasy that he’s talking to the real Neo, whatever real means in this case. Perhaps he is right. For Neo does give Karan what all true friendships do—time, the sustenance of fantasies, the illusion of advice and a mild sense of awe.

*Tanuj Solanki is the author of Neon Noon, and he recently won the Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar for his short story collection, Diwali In Muzaffarnagar. ■*