

Move Over, Dan Rather

By [Paul Farhi](#) May 31, 2000

She has a cute shock of teal-green hair, a button nose and a voice once described as Barbie on Quaaludes. She moves. She emotes. She reads the latest news.

"Hi, there," says Ananova, blinking her saucer eyes on the computer screen. "In the Philippines, negotiations continue over the fate of 21 hostages . . ." Blink. Blink.

The news is real, but Ananova is not. She is a news droid, a virtual newscaster. Born full-grown, she popped onto the World Wide Web (www.ananova.com) last month. Punch her "play" button and she'll read you a smattering of up-to-the-minute news bytes, periodically refreshed by her keepers and creators at the British Press Association. Ananova can wink, nod, raise an eyebrow and express surprise or amusement as she tells the world about itself.

In other words, just like the real thing but without the hair spray and contract negotiations.

In her first month in worldwide circulation, Ananova received 1.6 million unique visitors, ranking Ananova.com among the most popular news sites. She is created and programmed in Leeds, England, but her most frequent hits come from Canada, the United States and, for some reason, Hong Kong. She has received two marriage proposals.

The flurry of interest suggests Ananova might be telling us something about the future of information. And maybe a little about the present.

Ananova is what computer scientists variously call an "agent" or "avatar." She's a mass of sophisticated speech-recognition software and computing power designed to put a human face--and personality--on our interactions with machines. The development of avatars (a Hindi term meaning "incarnation of a god") reflects a rather obvious fact of human nature: People would rather interact with people--even ones that are only vaguely human--than with silicon and cold type.

Agents like Ananova could be the start of the inevitable march toward the HAL-ization of computing. Next month, Motorola will roll out a computer-driven character named Mya, a spike-haired female humanoid "cyber-assistant" that will read e-mail messages, stock quotes, news, sports scores and weather forecasts off the Internet via wireless and conventional phone connections.

At MIT's famed Media Lab, Prof. Justine Cassell is developing Rea, a female real-estate-agent "agent" capable of providing spoken, "real-time" information from a vast housing database. ("How big is the kitchen, Rea?") At the University of Southern California's Integrated Systems Center, work is progressing on what Director Max Nikias calls "immersive environments"--computerized worlds in which users create accurate representations of themselves (or perhaps improved versions of themselves) to interact with representations of others.

"People already know how to engage in face-to-face conversation with other people," says Cassell. ". . . I think people see in the advent of new technologies a chance for increased personalization in their everyday interaction with machines."

Makes you wonder: Do we need to get our news from humans anymore? What are people for, anyway?

The Press Association's designers spent a year getting Ananova's quasi-human appearance just so, and with good reason: Ananova is supposed to be the Universal Anchorwoman, engineered to inspire trust and credibility in computer users everywhere.

They made her white because Web surfers, at least for now, are predominantly white; they made her youthful because her anticipated audience is that, too. They made her attractive but not a bimbo, a tad punkish but unthreateningly so. Her solitary distinctive touch is the swatch of blue-green in her hair (matched by her blouse).

If Ananova's look and mannerisms seem familiar, it's because you've seen them many times before. They're computerized riffs straight from the TV anchor's playbook; as a transitional figure from television to computers, she's supposed to mimic the Kabuki-like moves of the news anchor. See the way Ananova looks serious and grave when talking about some foreign hot spot? See how her look changes to slightly amused when the story is light and inconsequential? See how she appears to be looking downward at you, as if she were literally on a pedestal?

"We looked to traditional news readers and the way they use visual punctuation," said Mark Spanton, creative director of the association's new-media arm, now known as Ananova Ltd. "It's all pre-programmed in." By this he means that all stories are "tagged," or specially coded, so that Ananova displays the appropriate "reaction" as she reads.

Ananova is a she because her creators relied on research indicating that both sexes respond favorably to information and instructions from a feminine voice. Others have already figured this out. Barry White doesn't inform you that the doors are closing on the Metro, a disembodied woman's voice does. James Earl Jones sets you up on Bell Atlantic directory assistance, but a woman's voice provides the goods. Voice mail, the elevator announcement, the move-to-your-right recording at the airport, the reminder that your luxmobile's lights are still on--all are women's voices. Arthur C. Clarke had it wrong in at least one respect: HAL will be a woman.

Despite her British roots, Ananova sounds more American than not, and a bit drugged at that. The Americanization of Ananova is calculated, too. Ananova's British creators couldn't give her an English accent, not when the flat American variety is the de facto worldwide standard (thank you, Disney; thank you, CNN).

For the record, the Press Association officially describes Ananova's accent as "mid-Atlantic," whatever that is.

The sophisticated text-to-voice software that enables Ananova to "speak" is not without flaws; in Ananova's world, the IRA political party Sinn Fein is "sin fayn" instead of "shin fayn" and

Mount Everest is "Mount Ev-her-hest." And since a pack of Brits feeds her her lines, Ananova can't help but be culture-bound. The other day, she read a story about former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet being "rushed to hospital," a phrase no Yank would likely utter.

On the other hand, she pronounces "Giuliani" with an accent that would impress a Brooklynite.

Veteran TV news consultant Al Primo finds Ananova "an interesting and clever way to present the news" that will succeed if Web surfers warm up to her personality, such as it is.

"Ninety percent of any newscast is the newscaster," says Primo, who invented the high-energy Eyewitness News format in the 1960s. "When you talk to focus groups, all the marks go to personality. Hardly anyone ever mentions the other stuff, like graphics and writing and camera work."

Ah, personality. In an effort to enhance her human "feel," the Press Association has tricked up a "back story" for Ananova. She is supposed to be 28 years old, 5 feet 8, a "quietly intelligent" woman who enjoys sports statistics, "The Simpsons," Mozart and Oasis, the perpetually disbanding British rock band.

Still, other TV news pros are a bit chilly toward the whole idea.

"She reminds me of the replicants in 'Blade Runner,' " says WJLA anchor Kathleen Matthews. "But I guess if Harrison Ford could fall in love with a replicant, a lot of people could fall in love with her. . . . What I hope is still appealing about a human being is the element of surprise. I'm not sure you get that with her. She's a programmed computer image. You know it's scripted."

"Does it replace humans as journalists? No, obviously not," says Barbara Cochran, a former network news producer who heads the Radio and Television News Directors Association in Washington. "It's backed by 500 journalists in the Press Association. Someone is always going to have to gather the news and organize it. There's always going to be someone who has to guarantee that the facts are accurate. You can't do that with a puppet."

Besides, "how can you warm up to someone with green hair?" asks Doreen Gentzler, the longtime anchor at WRC-TV, Channel 4. "It seems to me people are spending way too much time in front of their computers. If you're going to the Internet to get news, this seems more time-consuming than reading the headlines" displayed on the Ananova Web site.

So Gentzler doesn't worry that an android may replace her? "I won't rule it out entirely," she says, laughing, "but not in the year 2000."

Give technology time, though, and it could get interesting. Soon, Ananova will speak French and Dutch. Soon, she will be available via wireless devices like cell phones, with an "on-demand" feature that will enable her to pop up and deliver information whenever you want it, wherever you are. Soon, users will be able to customize the newscast's length, frequency and type of news delivered. Ultimately, all of the text material available on the Ananova site will be available in streaming video newscast form.

Just as important, perhaps, is that Ananova will evolve as a "human." Her creators promise that we will someday see the "full" Ananova, not just her image from the collarbone up. Fashion designers are working on giving her a variety of outfits, instead of the same unimaginative frock she wears now.

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But all this could be mere tinkering compared with what's coming. Someday, through the magic of advanced audio and video technology and super-fast Internet connections, you may be able to get your news from a digitally constructed "avatar" of your choosing, says USC's Nikias.

Nikias says these lifelike human representations--anyone from Walter Cronkite to Pamela Anderson--could be programmed to move and talk in realistic but nonetheless artificial settings.

As Nikias begins to describe it, it starts to sound vaguely like something out of "The Matrix." Of course, says Nikias, there will be a need for "checks and balances" on digital identities to ensure authenticity, or else everyone might start creating Virtual President avatars and start declaring nuclear wars.

But consider the benefits: "Instead of writing text messages, as we do now," he says, "we could create a chat room where my avatar can walk in, sit down and talk to your avatar." Your avatar could be your daily newscaster, e-mail reader, weather forecaster and online shopper.

Imagine. In the future, the ultimate cyber robot could be . . . you.