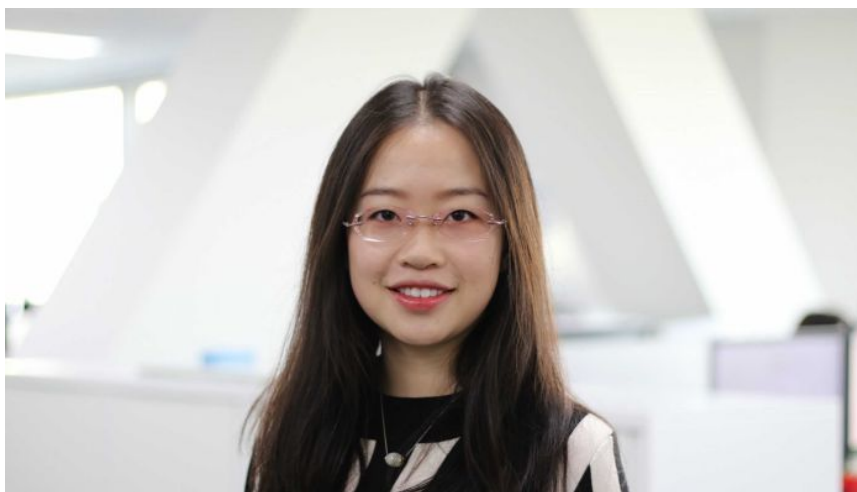


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Chatbot takes on cyberbullying

20 hours ago

Xiaoning Mo, Australia Plus



Wendy Li, second-year JD student from Melbourne Law School, team member of Winner for Viability in 2017 LawWithoutWalls X competition.

Supplied: Paul Pasztaleniec, Melbourne Law School

If she didn't enter an online competition open to law students around the world, Wendy Li wouldn't have thought about building an online chatbot to help the young people who fall victim to cyberbullying.

When Wendy Li, a Chinese student studying JD (Juris Doctor) at Melbourne Law School of Melbourne University, decided to participate in the four month long LawWithoutWalls X competition, she didn't expect she would get very far.

"I was initially attracted by the prize of the competition. The final winners will be travelling to Miami of the states for a week!" says Wendy.

The competition teamed up over 30 students who were divided into 10 groups. Supported by mentors from academic, business and technology professions, each group was assigned a law-related social justice problem. The problems included "How can the law enable a better life for migrants held in detention?" and "How can lawyers ease the settlement process for new asylum seekers?"

The topic assigned to Wendy's team was "How can we protect youth from cyberbullying?"

"My teammates are from UK, France and China. We discussed via Skype once a week. We spent two months doing lots and lots of research and found out very few young people seek help off line when they encounter cyberbullying. Not many look for help online either. But some are willing to chat on forums and blogs," says Wendy.



Screenshot of LWOW Live Room for the final presentation, an Adobe Connect chatting room equipped with real-time chat, location display on a world map, video connection, audio connection and PPT/PDF sharing.

Supplied.

So the team, who are all law students, decided to build an online chatting robot targeting cyberbullying within two months. And they achieved their goal.

The final product is called Amibot, an online chatting robot which Wendy described as only "semi-finished" and not very intelligent.

"We would love to build a chatbot which is intelligent enough to learn human language. But for us this is almost impossible. So our solution is to build a simple guiding robot which operates through menus. For example, when you say 'hello', it will reply 'hi'. And then it will provide a menu of options for you to choose. We call it a tree system," says Wendy.

Wendy said the role Amibot plays in tackling cyberbullying is more of a "band aid" rather than a one stop shop to solve the problems. Amibot will first comfort you and then guide you to a place where you can get help.

As the targeted users are young people, the team looked for help from high school students so that the language Amibot uses is on trend.

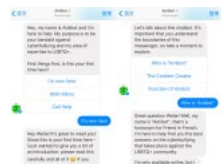
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“We looked for middle school students whose native language is English. We showed them the auto responses Amibot sends out. Unfortunately, none of them were passed. The students said they by no means would speak like this. Eventually they became our consultants. We will consult them for every sentence Amibot speaks.”

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Even though the team has put in a lot of effort to making the bot, it’s still not very clever. “Oops, I can’t understand” seems to be its favourite words.

But no matter how immature Amibot is, Wendy’s team is the only team that has produced a final product at the end of the competition. Other the other teams in the competition didn’t bring their ideas to fruition. As a result, Amibot won the Award of Viability.



A sample of Amibot dialogue: you could start your own conversation or click the main menu to explore more.

Supplied.

The team didn’t make it to Miami, but Wendy is very proud.

“This chatbot should have a really positive future as there isn’t any similar product targeting cyberbullying yet,” says Wendy, “and I have gained a lot from the competition. I’ve learned how to be proactive and persistent. Now I am very used to talking via Skype and reading legal cases much faster.”

Another lesson has been learned too.

“If we have money, we will definitely hire a coder,” says Wendy.

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