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At Your Service: Library Robot 'Rubo' Meets the SBU Community

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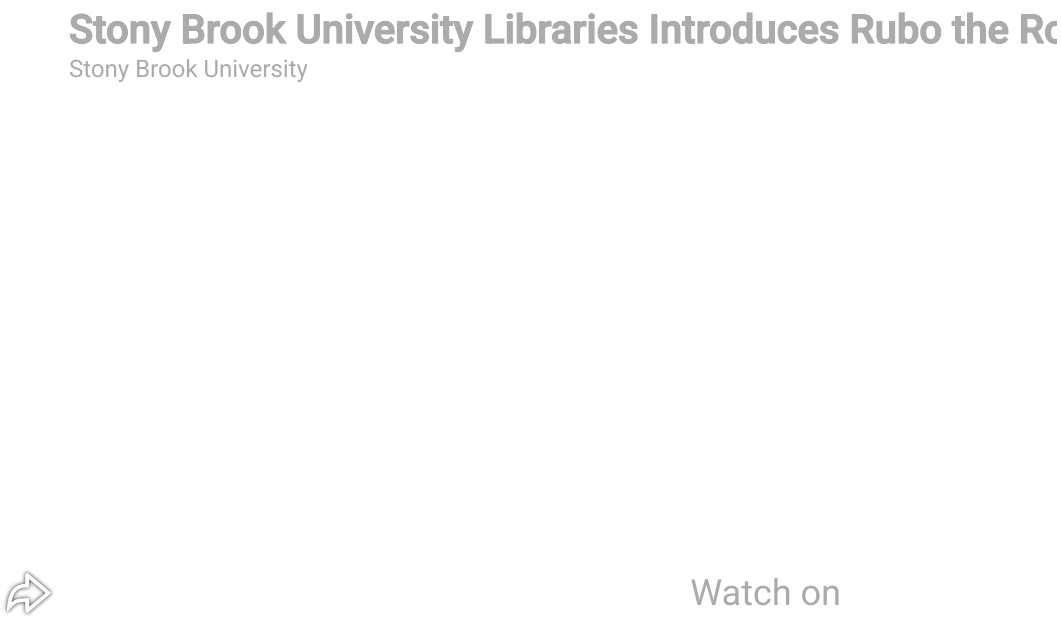




Stony Brook University Libraries introduces Rubo, a robot library assistant that will provide face-to-face help, real-time question answering and conversational support. Photos by John Griffin.

The week-long meet-and-greet in the Melville Library galleria highlighted a project that is among the first of its kind in academic libraries worldwide.

“Students were able to get up close and engage so they could focus on his gestures and what he says,” said Xian Bak, library data scientist faculty member and Rubo’s principal investigator. “It knows SBU history, milestones and traditions. Different events will have different audiences. We want to tailor the knowledge base to the event and situation so Rubo can draw the information based on the anticipated questions.”



In April, University Libraries, in collaboration with colleagues from Computer Science, Mechanical Engineering and Technology, AI and Society, was awarded $298,000 through the President’s Fast Impact Fund, with support from the Office of the Provost, to develop Rubo, which brings AI out of the screen and into physical space and is designed to answer real-time questions about the library and campus and help users navigate facilities. It also explains how to check out books, assists with study room reservations and plays simple games like rock-paper-scissors.

Standing 4’6” and weighing 77 pounds, Rubo features a digital display face, a glowing blue circular light on its head and a bipedal mechanical frame. The robot features multilingual interaction and can converse in Mandarin, Farsi and German in addition to English.

bridging the gap between digital services and in-person interactions, and redefining how campus communities access information and support.

In her role, Bak applies statistical analysis, machine learning, modern artificial intelligence and data visualization approaches to support data-driven decision making in library applications. She said her group received the robot in June and has been working intently since then to get it ready for its debut.



“We’ve incorporated historic data, and we know what the frequently asked directional questions are,” said Bak. “So we prepared the knowledge base for that. In the future we can expand it further. We don’t want it to just give answers you can get through a simple internet search, so right now we have some guardrails on what it can answer, and how it can answer.”

“It’s really innovative and awesome what it can do,” said Ashley Martin, a pre-law sociology major. “I like to see technology and AI being used for education or communication rather than some of the other uses we’ve seen. I think this will be a really cool addition. It’s hard to get away from technology, considering how embedded it is in so many parts of our lives.”

"I think a lot of these robots are not very functional right now because they're mostly used for demo," he said. "But if they get to a point where they can actually do a lot of things that we do, I think American manufacturing will be in big trouble."

Nguyen said he's already seen the impact of AI in technical fields.

"We already have large language models in computer science, and they've already gotten rid of many computer science jobs," he said. "I think a robot like this would have a bigger effect on blue collar jobs."

Martin has also experienced the darker side of AI.

"I was a TA for a little while in my sociology classes, so I saw how AI affected students and their learning," she said. "I think that it's really good for helping with certain tasks and getting good information. But as with anything, it could be abused."

Nilanjan Chakraborty, associate professor in the Department of Mechanical Engineering, acknowledged the fear that comes along with AI.

"I understand very well why that fear is there, and it's true that many of these technologies, if they are not developed carefully, if we do not make sure that they're used in the right places, they can do bad things," he said. "I'm not thinking about an apocalypse, and they're not taking over the world. But they can still do bad things. The onus is on us to develop these technologies responsibly, and I think there are many researchers who think about these things and are trying to do that."

Rubo's initial deployment will focus on high-traffic library environments, where demand for assistance is significant. Beyond its immediate service role, Rubo is envisioned as a cross-disciplinary platform for experimentation, teaching and research.

"From the education aspect, it gets students excited about understanding intelligence, artificial intelligence, embodied intelligence, and they learn to program," said Chakraborty. "They learn to think about motion and how to design motion and systems that look like they are acting intelligently. There is a clear benefit from an education and research point of view. This gives us a platform where we can implement our ideas and thoughts."

facing environments.

— Robert Emproto

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