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Startups Focus on AI at South by Southwest

A new crop of startups aims to bring artificial intelligence to the masses.

By Erica Naone

South by Southwest (SXSW) Interactive has a reputation as being *the* place for social Web startups to hit the headlines. Twitter found one of its first big audiences at the event in 2007, and attendees are among the most eager adoptees of new social Web tools.

To harness this cutting-edge mood, last year the event's organizers launched the **Microsoft BizSpark Accelerator**, a competition showcasing 32 Web-focused startups. This year's competition starts today.

Chris Valentine, the event's producer, says that social Web businesses are still king--200 companies applied to compete, and there were twice as many in the social media category as in any other. But he's starting to see a shift in the technology behind the companies involved in the event. "We knew we were going in the direction of artificial intelligence," Valentine says, and this year there are a number of startups harnessing technology from the field--especially natural language processing and computer vision.

A prime example is **Siri**, a startup that launched this February. The company was spun out of **SRI International**, a research organization based in Menlo Park, CA, commercializing technology developed as part of the **CALO** artificial intelligence project. The company offers a **virtual personal assistant** with impressive voice recognition, learning capabilities, and the capacity to interact with many different apps. Its founders describe Siri as "the mother of all mashups with a big brain in the front."

Other startups on the Accelerator list have less heavy-duty academic research backing them, but they are also trying to harness rapidly maturing areas of artificial intelligence. "People are looking to simplify their lives," Valentine says, and new companies are hoping to strike it rich by helping them do that.

Valentine points to **Amulet Devices**, a startup based in Dublin that's built a voice-operated remote control that can be used to access a wide variety of home entertainment systems. The remote uses position sensors to detect when it has been picked up, at which point it activates its microphone and transmits sound to Amulet software installed on a user's media center. Speech-recognition algorithms identify the user's words, including relatively informal commands such as "skip over ads."

That Valentine identifies new entertainment technology as another trend this year is no surprise. South by Southwest also has film and music festivals that draw huge interest each year. He points to the Austin, TX-based startup **Are You Watching This?**, which analyzes real-time statistics from sporting events around the world to identify important moments in the games. The system sends alerts to sports fans and creates instant clips so they don't miss key plays.

Other companies in the competition include real-time search engine **Collecta**; **Aha Mobile**, which intelligently selects news from the Web based on a user's interests and location and converts it to audio; and **Khush**, a startup spun out of the Georgia Tech Music Intelligence Lab that has

developed an application that automatically generates music to match what a user sings.

Over the next two days, two panels of judges will select winners in four categories: innovative Web technologies, personal social media, business social media, and entertainment technology.

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