David Isbitski ’98, chief evangelist for Amazon Alexa and keynote speaker at the 2018 VOICE conference, returned to campus in July to reprise his role at the world's largest gathering of voice developers and executives.

**Q:** HOW DID NJIT PIQUE YOUR INTEREST IN TECHNOLOGY AND ENABLE YOUR CAREER?

**A:** I was always excited about technology from a very early age, but when I was a freshman at NJIT, the Internet was just starting to form. Most jobs in technology were either related to computer engineering or computer science. By my junior year, a new area of study started to arrive called "Information Systems." By switching into the Information Systems major, I was able to get a background in business and combine it with technology to solve problems beyond just computer chips and theoretical algorithms. Today, we see technology used across all sorts of industries and job roles, but at the time of my matriculation, that future wasn’t always clear. I was thankful I had the opportunity to combine business with technology at such an early stage in the tech world and its help serves me well to this day.

**Q:** HOW DID YOU BECOME A TECHNOLOGY EVANGELIST?

**A:** Since grade school, when I used my first computer, the Commodore VIC-20, I’ve been very interested in whatever new technology came my way. So I was always very excited about new things and needed to tell people what they had to have! But I was a business consultant for many years before I applied in 2007 for a job as a developer evangelist for Microsoft. I was then able to use my “developer personality” to educate people on how to think about and use web- and mobile-based technology. In 2015, I was the first employee of the Alexa skills kit group. I remember sitting around a table talking about our first 10 skills. We recently reached 100,000.

**Q:** HOW IS VOICE TECHNOLOGY A DISRUPTOR, BOTH PRACTICALLY AND SOCIETALLY?

**A:** I don’t think it is. I see time as the disruptor. As it goes by, things change, while I see voice technology as timeless. I think it actually returns things to us not just of intention, but of context. And here’s one of the challenges for that technology: learning that human conversation takes place within a specific culture – it’s not just about programming written code, but building models based upon real conversations. In Japan, for example, you don’t interrupt people. We’ve held forums to see what Alexa gets wrong and crowdsourced answers. Alexa’s understanding is phonetic, but she also learns voices and individuals’ language choices over time. When I ask for Top 10 hits, it’s very different from when my teenage daughter asks. Alexa gets smarter every day, and learning context is part of that.

**Q:** HOW IS VOICE TECHNOLOGY CHANGING THE WAY WE THINK ABOUT MACHINES?

**A:** Rather than teach people to talk to machines, we’ve taught machines to understand people. The most exciting thing for me is that people have conversations with their technology. That Alexa can now understand intention is huge. That’s the sea change. But I think it’s also changing our connection to ourselves and other people, as well as the way we use conversation. I imagine the future as very much like the holodeck in “Star Trek,” where the crew was able to bring back digital personalities like Einstein. I want my children to not just be able to say, ’I know Dad felt very strongly about this issue,’ but to see me before an audience defending my beliefs.

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