Convinced that every home would eventually have a robot—doing chores, minding the kids—engineers at Westinghouse pioneered a voice-controlled robot in the 1930s. They unveiled Elektro the Moto-Man at the 1939 New York World’s Fair. The 2.1-meter-tall, 118-kilogram robot “walked” by rolling along a track with its left leg bent, and it “talked” by way of prerecorded snippets played back from 33⅓-rpm records. It could also smoke a cigarette. Voice commands from a human assistant were turned into electrical pulses, which were then transmitted through telephone relays to the robot’s control unit, located offstage. One of Elektro’s pet lines was, “My brain is bigger than yours.” At 25 kg, it certainly was.

For more on Elektro, see https://spectrum.ieee.org/pastforward1018