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Europe launches largest civilian robotics research program, worth $3.8BN

By David Meyer June 03, 2014: 06:52 AM ET

(**gigaom.com**) -- A partnership between private-sector robotics firms and the European Commission has been launched, aiming to out-invest **the United States**, Japan and South Korea in developing the potential of robots.

The deal was signed back in December, but it was properly launched and branded at the Automatica trade fair in Munich, Germany, on Tuesday. Rather peculiarly, **the partnership** now bears the name SPARC. I asked the Commission why it chose to adopt the name of an **architecture** that's popular in supercomputers, but haven't received an explanation as yet.

SPARC has significant funding for the 2014-2020 period — €700 million ($952 million) from the European Commission and €2.1 billion ($2.85 billion) from 180 private companies and research organizations, who have banded together under the umbrella of **euRobotics**. The first tranche of funding will be parcelled out by the end of this year.

The office of EU digital chief Neelie Kroes told me on Tuesday that other robotics projects will also receive public funding outside of this partnership. Earlier European funding efforts for robotics doled out €536 million to 130 research projects involving around 500 organizations.

The idea, of course, is to put Europe at the forefront of robotics research. This is a crucial time for robotics development; great strides are being made on both the **hardware** and **software** sides. In terms of stimulating the sector, there's a lot to gain by outspending rival regions, assuming the funds are properly used.

In a **speech** on Tuesday, EU digital chief Neelie Kroes pointed out the myriad use cases and benefits that have politicians salivating: industrial competitiveness, **caring for the elderly**, drones and driverless cars. However, she also acknowledged at length the concerns of many ordinary people, noting that "70 percent of EU citizens believe that robots steal people's jobs."

Kroes said studies had shown that "each industrial robot actually supports 3.6 jobs [and] that robots will directly and indirectly create 2 million jobs over the next 8 years." Her office pointed me to a particular paper from consultancy Metra Martech, commissioned by the International Federation of Robotics (IFR) and entitled **"Positive Impact of Industrial Robots on Employment" (PDF)**. While it doesn't include those statistics, it's an interesting read.

According to the study, the rise in recent years of industrial robot use correlates with an increase in overall paid employment. It claims that this increase is partly the result of "increasing demand for services, and the creation of completely new products and markets, often related to the application of electronics to communication," and it says the loss of traditional manufacturing jobs in developed countries is more than offset by the rise in new kinds of manufacturing and distribution jobs – how that will fit with the rise of **shop floor automation** and driverless delivery is anyone's guess.

The European Commission reckons SPARC will lead to the creation of over 240,000 European jobs, but Kroes also noted a need for further investigation into the impact of robotics:

"Even with an overall positive impact on jobs, there will be different short and long term implications, and different impacts in different areas. With 25 million out of work, that is a legitimate cause for concern.

"We need a stronger evidence base to show the case, confront these issues, clear up the uncertainty and mistrust. Let's understand the concerns, and address them."

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