



Devices With Ears: What Alexa And Siri Mean For Privacy

Everybody wants to listen to your every word, collect your every data and then use it to parse your very soul to be used to further manipulate you. Technocracy? Yes! □ TN Editor

Between your laptop, smartphone, smart TV, and perhaps a virtual assistant, how many microphones are in your home?

The number of households with a hands-free assistant is growing by millions each year, but their convenience may come at a price. With law enforcement already using smart-device collected data as evidence, digital privacy rights are becoming more important - and less understood - than ever, as the rapid pace of technological advancement and shifting attitudes towards privacy keep the topic murky.

The home assistant Echo was Amazon's [best-selling product](#) last holiday season, with Forrester Research suggesting [6 million sales](#) in 2016 alone. The Echo family of devices are all variations on the theme of a smart speaker that can listen to, understand, and respond to voice commands for [everything from unit conversions](#), to spelling, to shopping. Like Siri's implementation in recent iOS devices, a large part of the convenience is how the device is always listening, so you don't have to put down what you're doing and find your phone to get an answer.

But some worry there's a fine line between always listening, and always recording. ACLU senior policy analyst Jay Stanley warns that "even the most remote threat of surveillance" can cast "[self-consciousness and chilling effects](#) ... over otherwise freewheeling private conversations".

We all act differently when we think we're in private. The question is, are we truly alone when we're with our devices?

In the case of Siri, the answer seems to be yes, mostly. There's no user-accessible record of your previous queries because Apple associates them with a random ID number, rather than your email address or iCloud account. After six months, both are deleted.

For the Echo, however, it's more complicated. "The cost of the device is not the ultimate revenue for these companies - advertising and personal information are what's at the end of the rainbow for them," explains Albert Gidari, the director of privacy at the Stanford Center for Internet and Society, in an email to the Christian Science Monitor.

As part of its quest to make ever more accurate recommendations and improve its voice recognition technology, Amazon maintains a database of your conversations with the Echo, which you can [see and manage online](#). In addition, [audio data is encrypted](#) when it enters and leaves your home, to minimize the risk of interception by hackers.

Why ship the data off at all? Because the Echo and the iPhone are more ear than brain, and all the heavy-duty data crunching required for machines to understand human speech is done on far-away Amazon and Apple servers. The good news is, the ears themselves aren't that smart. Beyond the wake commands of "Alexa" or "Hey Siri," very little data is stored locally and the devices record no conversation unless they hear the wake phrase first.

[Read full story here...](#)