

Shhh, Amazon's "Alexa" could be listening to our conversation

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LG Electronics Vice President David VanderWaal and Amazon Echo Vice President Mike George present the LG Smart InstaView Door-in-Door Refrigerator to CES 2017 attendees at the LG Electronics press conference on January 4, 2017, in Las Vegas, Nevada. Photo: Jack Dempsey/AP Images for LG Electronics

LAS VEGAS, Nev. — Alexa! Are you spying on me?

It's a fair question after recent events. Authorities investigating the slaying of an Arkansas man have tried to obtain voice recordings collected by an Amazon Echo speaker and its Alexa digital assistant.

Yet the popularity and capabilities of voice-enabled products such as the Echo continue to grow. At the CES gadget show in Las Vegas, which opened Thursday, Whirlpool, Samsung and other manufacturers are unveiling new ways to use voice services to control laundry machines, refrigerators and other home systems.

Consumers are apparently willing to trade a certain amount of privacy for convenience.

So what exactly is being collected, stored or shared by these smart devices?

"Echo Is Always Listening"

To work, the Echo is always listening. Once it hears someone utter a keyword, such as "Alexa," it shares what it hears with Amazon's servers to process a response. Those conversations are then stored indefinitely. Google's Home speaker works in a similar fashion.

The Echo "has to listen to everything. That's kind of disturbing," said Ryan O'Leary, vice president of WhiteHat Security's threat research center. "It doesn't capture voice until it hears the keyword, but it could. You're trusting the devices to not do that, but it's entirely possible."

In the Arkansas case, authorities investigating the death of a man found in a hot tub at a friend's home requested the contents of the home's Echo and Amazon's stored recordings in hopes they might contain evidence. The friend is charged with murder.

Amazon Objects To Order By Judge

A judge has signed off on the search, but Amazon has balked. Amazon has declined to comment specifically on the case but said the company objects to "overbroad or otherwise inappropriate demands as a matter of course."

Some experts worry that allowing such a search would take away people's privacy to an extent.

"It's not necessarily a direct threat for the average person, but the same thing can be said with any kind of privacy concern," O'Leary said. "People say you shouldn't be concerned if you're not doing anything wrong, but that's a dangerous precedent to set."

Meanwhile, more and more companies keep asking consumers to invite them into their homes.

Voice-Controlled Home Products

Whirlpool is adding Alexa voice control to its smart-home appliances, including a washing machine, a stove and a refrigerator. Someone can instruct the oven to pre-heat to 400 degrees by speaking a command to an Alexa-enabled device, such as the Echo.

Simplehuman has a voice-activated trash can, and GE Lighting has a table lamp using Alexa voice control.

For now, voice control is mostly an add-on feature rather than a main part of gadgets. It's there for those who want to use it, but it's not essential for the product to function.

Many manufacturers are opting to use Amazon's Alexa service for now, though some are embracing voice systems from Google, Apple or Samsung.

Nvidia's Shield TV streaming device, for instance, employs Google's Assistant service. Viewers can control video playback or find out the weather with just a voice command.

Samsung's new Family Hub refrigerator lets people use their voice to add items to shopping lists and order groceries online.

Changing The Way We Interact With Technology

CES chief economist Shawn DuBravac said as many as 700 companies could announce Alexa-integrated products during the gadget show. More than 1,500 such products already exist.

As the smart home becomes more entrenched, DuBravac said, voice control could change the way we interact with technology in much the way the computer mouse did in the 1980s.

"Connected microphones are starting to appear in everything from cars to children's toys," said James Plouffe, lead solutions architect at mobile-security company MobileIron.

"Consumers should think carefully about how comfortable they are with the prospect of a live mic in common household items."

Because Amazon says it uses information gathered by the Echo to improve its voice technology, that information has the potential to "live forever" online, Plouffe said.

TV Captures Your Private Conversations

The concern first grabbed headlines a couple of years ago, after Samsung said sensitive conversations could be captured by its voice-controlled smart TVs.

Based on the flood of new voice-controlled gadgets headed to market, tech companies are betting that consumers will get over their fears.

Derrick Dicol is executive director of Comcast's Xfinity Home, which uses voice controls in its home products. He noted that people had to get used to sharing their banking information online.

"This is less invasive than that," he said. "It's just a different thing people have to feel comfortable with."

Quiz

- 1 Read the paragraph from the section "Echo Is Always Listening."

To work, the Echo is always listening. Once it hears someone utter a keyword, such as "Alexa," it shares what it hears with Amazon's servers to process a response. Those conversations are then stored indefinitely. Google's Home speaker works in a similar fashion.

Which inference is BEST supported by the paragraph?

- (A) Many voice-enabled products work better than the Echo.
 - (B) Amazon's Echo and Google's Home speakers are useful devices to have in the home.
 - (C) Anyone with a voice-enabled product in their home may have private conversations stored.
 - (D) Most people are unaware that devices can record conversations.
- 2 Which section of the article BEST explains that companies believe people will get used to the idea of owning products that can listen to them in their homes?
- (A) "Echo Is Always Listening"
 - (B) "Amazon Objects To Order By Judge"
 - (C) "Changing The Way We Interact With Technology"
 - (D) "TV Captures Your Private Conversations"
- 3 Which of these sentences would be MOST important to include in an accurate and objective summary of the article?
- (A) Authorities in a murder investigation want to use stored recordings from an Amazon Echo, prompting privacy concerns about smart devices.
 - (B) Companies are taking a huge risk by betting that consumers will ultimately be more interested in convenience than privacy.
 - (C) If people are not doing anything wrong, then the fact that Echo records and stores their information indefinitely should not be worrisome.
 - (D) Voice control on appliances such as dishwashers and ovens will soon be essential to making those appliances function.

- 4 Read the paragraph from the section "Changing The Way We Interact With Technology."

"Connected microphones are starting to appear in everything from cars to children's toys," said James Plouffe, lead solutions architect at mobile-security company MobileIron. "Consumers should think carefully about how comfortable they are with the prospect of a live mic in common household items."

How does this paragraph develop the article's central ideas?

- (A) by showing that people love the convenience of voice control devices, and suggesting they will be important in the future
- (B) by pointing out the widespread appearance of voice control devices, and stating some concerns of a security expert
- (C) by showing that people are becoming increasingly dependent on voice control devices, and offering an opinion in support of this
- (D) by pointing out how companies are experimenting with different voice control devices, and outlining which are successful

