

Why Amazon, Google and Apple want to record you

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Every person who brings a new Echo speaker from Amazon into their home gets automatically recorded every time they utter the "Alexa" wake word.

That is, unless they mute the microphone on the device itself. Or diligently go to the Alexa smartphone app, to manually delete the recordings.

Amazon could offer the option of not recording us, but it doesn't. And it

will tell you every way but Tuesday how important the recordings are to "improve" the Alexa experience.

Which got us wondering: Why is this really such a big deal to Amazon, Google and Apple, and why do the companies make it so hard to stop them from monitoring us?

Let's begin with Amazon, which seems to do everything in its power to stop you from deleting the recordings via the Alexa smartphone app in the privacy section. "Voice recordings are used to improve the accuracy of your interactions with Alexa," the company says. "Deleting voice recordings associated with your account may degrade your experience."

Amazon does offer two very minor voice commands to erase the audio, by saying, "Alexa, delete what I just said," or "Delete everything I said today," but Amazon will still have transcripts from at least three months of your recordings unless you go in and manually get rid of them.

Once you do that, Amazon urges you to reconsider. "Deleting your [voice recordings](#) may degrade your experience....are you sure you want to proceed?" Amazon gives you the option of automatic deletion, but only for every three months or 18 months.

"We don't keep data for data's sake," Amazon senior Vice President Dave Limp told U.S. TODAY in September. "We're very convicted that by keeping this data...it improves the service materially."

At Google, whose Google Assistant goes beyond the Home speaker line to be an integral part of the Android smartphone platform and a feature on many devices from the Nest thermostat to Lenovo smart displays, the recordings go way beyond just using the "Hey, Google" wake word.

Google manually tracks every search you make, via your typewritten

keyboard clicks, as well as every word uttered into many Google apps and even Google.com for voice commands.

So when we opened the Google Assistant app on the iPhone this week, and said, "We are told that Google only records you if you first use the wake word. Then how to explain this, huh?" every word was recorded and stored. We played it back and listened.

And continued on the Google app on an Android Pixel phone and Google.com on an Apple MacBook Pro. The results didn't change. We were recorded every time.

Like Amazon, Google invites you to delete your recordings and keystrokes manually, or automatically every 3 or 18 months.

Google advises why it wants to record you. "The activity that you keep can improve your experience anywhere you use your Google Account," the company says. "What you search, read and watch can work together to help you get things done faster, discover new content and pick up where you left off."

It says the audio and voice tracking is "opt in" only, but it uses strong persuasive wording to convince you to give it the OK because otherwise, your experience will be "limited," according to Google.

To opt out, go to Google's settings (icon on the top right of your browser), go to Data and Personalization and Web and App Activity, and make sure that "Include Voice and Audio Recordings," is unchecked.

The bad news: Even unchecked, your previous recordings are still stored on Google servers. You'll need to go in and delete them manually.

Apple uses its alternative stance on privacy as a marketing tool. It doesn't

urge you not to delete the recordings, like Amazon. In fact, it doesn't even automatically record your interactions with Siri. The company says you need to volunteer.

"Users can opt in to help Siri improve by learning from audio samples of their requests," Apple says.

Unlike its rivals, Apple will make you work to volunteer. Within the general Settings, under Analytics and Improvements, Apple offers the ability to "help improve Siri and Dictation by allowing Apple to store and review audio of your Siri and dictation interactions," by clicking the feature on. By default, it's turned off.

But opting in, the users may be monitored. "A small sample of audio from Siri requests may be reviewed by Apple employees to measure how well Siri was responding and to improve its reliability," Apple says. "For example, did the user intend to wake Siri? Did Siri hear the request accurately? And did Siri respond appropriately to the request?"

Bret Kinsella, the editor of the Voicebot.ai website, says the companies are justified in recording us and playing back the tapes.

"They need to see where the errors occur, and the only way to do that is with real people," he says. "They could use panels instead, but it's not the same as a real-life experience."

What would Alexa be like if Amazon didn't record us?

"Alexa would be very good at understanding common speech patterns of professionals who live in (Amazon's headquarters) Seattle," he says.

"And that's about it."

In other tech news this week

CES starts Sunday. Flying cars, sex toys, 8K TV, even Ivanka Trump. That's some of what to expect from the tech industry's annual pilgrimage to the desert. CES, the mammoth tech trade show organized by the Consumer Technology Association, will draw some 170,000 people from around the world to Las Vegas to launch products and services—but also to make deals and schmooze with one another.

New Year's inventory: It's not too late to get serious about those New Year's tech resolutions—like beefing up your passwords and getting a password manager to keep track of them.

TV snooping: We talked about Google, Amazon and Apple's monitoring of you on smartphones and the Web. TV manufacturers are notorious for doing this as well, part of the deal with the devil you make when you buy a super low-cost TV. How to disable them? We have some ideas.

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