

Alexa, Google could be listening to your work calls. Here's what to do.

April 8 2020, by Jefferson Graham, Usa Today



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

A reminder to those who are working at home: You might want to turn your Amazon or Google smart home speaker them off, or at the very least, mute the microphone.

What most people forget is that Alexa and the Google Assistant are always listening. Sure, they only come to life after you utter "Alexa" or "Hey, Google," but what happens when you slip those words in the middle of sentences?

You'll be recorded.

Amazon and Google record every interaction, even if you don't ask a specific question, and the recordings are stored on Amazon and Google servers. (You have the option of going in and deleting the recordings after the fact.)

Sometimes the speakers are awakened with words that they mistake for the wake words. According to a recent study by Northeastern University, the connected speakers kicked into action many times based on those mistakes. The university found that words that rhymed with "k" and sound like Alexa, like "exclamation," would awake the [speaker](#) and start recording.

The great thing about having an Amazon Echo or Google Home speaker in your home is that you can use your voice to get the radio played, turn on and off [smart lights](#), control the TV and way more.

But now you're home at work, dealing with [sensitive information](#) that your employer might not want recorded by Google and Amazon.

You could say something innocuous like "Hey Google, turn off the lights," or "Alexa, what time is it?" and there's no problem there.

The issue is what happens when you drop the wake words into a normal conversation. It's then when you'll be recorded. Snippets get sent straight to Google and Amazon.

Imagine you say something like "Amazon and Alexa have decimated our company, now we're flat broke and don't know what to do." Or use the same or similar phrase, replace Alexa for Google.

(We did just that Monday, as an example, and the recording is now being stored by Amazon.)

According to Bloomberg, a prominent United Kingdom law firm asked staffers working at home to mute or shut off their devices when discussing client matters.

"Perhaps we're being slightly paranoid, but we need to have a lot of trust in these organizations and these devices," Mishcon de Reya partner Joe Hancock told Bloomberg. "We'd rather not take those risks."

Bret Kinsella, the editor of the Voicebot.ai website, thinks concerns about snooping are "overblown."

Amazon and Google have "no interest in mining data from you about what you're talking about at [home](#). People are trying to find some way to be outraged about this, but it's just a false wakeup problem. The snippets don't go anywhere."

To play it safe, you have four choices, says Kinsella:

—Go ahead and let the Amazon and Google speakers play music for you.

—Mute the microphones. Concentrate on your work, and if you need to listen to music, wear some headsets and turn the microphones off. It's a simple switch.

—Simply unplug the speakers.

—Change the wake word. Amazon has three choices: Alexa, Amazon or Computer. Google doesn't have as many choices: just "OK, Google" or "Hey, Google." ____

(c)2020 U.S. Today

Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: Alexa, Google could be listening to your work calls. Here's what to do. (2020, April 8) retrieved 30 May 2023 from <https://techxplore.com/news/2020-04-alexa-google.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.