

Before you buy, consider privacy please

25 November 2019, by Jefferson Graham, Usa Today



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

This weekend, many folks will be poring over retail circulars, online ads and promotions, doing their research to get ahead on the best deals for Black Friday gifts.

But before you brave the Thursday/Friday lines and/or click the buy button on a great deal, we ask you to take a minute and consider the downside of the digital age —your privacy.

Are you ready to install a Facebook microphone and [video camera](#) in your home with the new, improved and less expensive Portal video chat device? Do you want to give Amazon even more access to your data by putting an Echo speaker in the kitchen? You've heard about how cool a wearable smartwatch or fitness tracker is, but really, how do you feel about giving Google access to your sleep, dieting and fitness habits? (The company is acquiring Fitbit.)

The folks at the Mozilla Foundation, which makes the Firefox browser, have consumers in mind with a new chart outlining the worst privacy offenders this holiday season, a list that's topped by the Ring video doorbell and ancillary products, the Roku streaming players and WEMO's smart home

accessory, a Wi-Fi-connected light dimmer.

Other popular digital essentials end up on the list as well, including the Amazon Kindle, the Instant Pot and a "smart" cat litter.

So what's the issue with the Ring, the Wi-Fi-connected doorbell that allows you to answer the door from anywhere and can capture video of what's happening on your porch?

"These doorbells do have some noted potential privacy vulnerabilities that could let someone go Big Brother on you in your own home," notes Mozilla.

Customers have to consent to allow Ring to share the doorbell footage with law enforcement, but "once they have access, they can save it indefinitely," says Rebecca Ricks, a Mozilla researcher who worked on the report.

What's the consumer to do who wants a connected doorbell? Buy the Nest version, which is owned by Google, a company that tracks our every move, and in the case of the Google Maps app, keeps following you even if the app is closed?

The Nest doorbell "didn't have as many privacy violations," she says. "There really aren't a lot of great options for consumers in this area though. There are lots of tradeoffs you have to make."

Ring, which is owned by Amazon, said in a statement that it takes customer security seriously, and "we have experienced, full teams dedicated to ensuring the safety and security of our products and systems."

So what about streaming, the hottest tech trend of the year?

For those who haven't joined the on-demand revolution, the easiest way is to buy a streaming player, which is as low as \$25, from Roku or Amazon, or splurge with the more pricey Apple TV

(starts at \$149.)

The Roku is one of the best-selling products but gets a thumbs down from Mozilla for its two-way TV viewing. You buy the unit, connect it to the TV, and enable Roku to monitor what you watch, for how long, and report it to advertising companies, along with your demographic information.

Ricks calls Roku one of the "worst offenders" in privacy issues and doesn't support its policy on data collection. "They make more money on selling advertising than they do on devices." That should be remembered when you pick up a cheap device, she notes.

Mozilla gives good marks (4.5 stars) to the Fire Stick but has concerns about the data Amazon collects—"does it remain on the servers?" That's a question mark, Ricks says. She prefers the Apple TV because Apple has stricter rules about how data is shared than Amazon and Roku.

Speaking of Amazon, one of the longest-running and popular tech products, the Kindle e-reader, got called out in the report for not having a lock-screen. Anyone can pick up a Kindle and get right into it.

In the smart home, Mozilla picked Wemo's \$59.99 Wi-Fi smart dimmer for having poor security features, notably no strong password protection, encryption or a policy to deal with security vulnerabilities.

Wemo says it encrypts all communication between the app, cloud and device and takes privacy and security "seriously."

Other issues: The Wi-Fi edition of the Instapot got dinged because "we were unable to determine whether the company manages security vulnerabilities," Mozilla says. The most criticized product on the chart belongs to OurPets, with its SmartScoop Intelligent Litter Box.

The idea is to send you a notification every time the cat steps in and does its thing. But the connected scooper didn't pass the grade for privacy policy and lack of password protection and of a system to deal with security vulnerabilities.

So finally, shoppers, the fact is, we live in a digital world, and our data is out there. But perhaps take a minute to read the fine print before adding these products to your cart. Perhaps if enough of us scream loudly enough that we don't want to be tracked, monitored and such and, in return, refuse to buy these products, the companies just might get the message?

(c)2019 U.S. Today

Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

APA citation: Before you buy, consider privacy please (2019, November 25) retrieved 29 November 2021 from <https://techxplore.com/news/2019-11-privacy.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.