
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Can we trust a smart speaker?



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Dan

Hello and welcome to 6 Minute English. I'm Dan.

Rob

And I'm Rob. So Dan what's... Oh, sorry. Oh, it's my wife. Err... hang on...

Dan

You didn't answer!

Rob

Don't take this personally, Dan, but I'm not exactly crazy about someone eavesdropping on my phone call. If you **eavesdrop** on something, you secretly listen to someone's conversation. Some things are private, you know?

Dan

Oh! Of course! I totally understand. One quick question for you though... do you have a smart speaker? You know, like the Google Assistant, Amazon's Alexa or Apple's Siri.

Rob

Oh sure, yes, I've got one! It's great! I can ask it all sorts of questions, it tells me about the news and weather, it plays music when I want... it does all sorts! You just give it a voice command and it does what you want!

Dan

So it can hear you, can it?

Rob

Of course! How else can you give it a voice command?

Dan

All the time?

Rob

Well, I assume so.

Dan

So how do you know it's not **eavesdropping** on you?

Rob

Well, I... oh... I see. I hadn't thought of that.

Dan

That's our topic for this 6 Minute English. How safe is your smart speaker? However, before that, here's our quiz question. By what percentage has the number of smart speakers used in US households increased from December 2017 to December 2018? Is it...

- a) around 40%
- b) around 60%, or
- c) around 80%?

Rob

Oh, well, I know they are very popular even in my household. So I'm going to go for c) around 80%.

Dan

We'll find out if you're right later in the programme. So, smart speakers and privacy! Florian Schaub is an assistant professor at the University of Michigan School of Information. Here he is speaking on the BBC World Service programme The Why Factor about smart speakers. What does he say people are introducing into their homes?

Florian Schaub

You're basically introducing... listening **bug** in your home, in your most intimate space. While the companies say they are only actively listening to what's going on in your home when they hear the keyword, the microphone is still on the whole time in order to be able to detect that keyword. We don't know to what extent companies are co-operating with the government or to what extent the government might try to circumvent company security mechanisms in order to then be able to listen to what you're doing.

Dan

So what did he say people are introducing, Rob?

Rob

He basically said we're introducing a listening **bug**. Now, a **bug** is a small electronic device used for secretly listening to conversations. Much like a spy would use.

Dan

Yes, and he mentioned it was in our most **intimate** space! **Intimate** means 'private and personal'.

Rob

Well, I can't think of anywhere more **intimate** than my home.

Dan

Indeed! He also said that the smart speaker's microphone is on the whole time – even though the companies insist that they're only actively listening when the keyword is said.

Rob

Yes, he suggested that we can't know how far a company might be co-operating with a government to **eavesdrop** on people.

Dan

Or whether a government might be **circumventing** a smart speaker's security and listening in anyway without the company's or owner's permission!

Rob

Circumvent means 'cleverly bypass or go around'. So if all this eavesdropping is possible, why are smart speakers so popular?

Dan

Good question! And here's Florian Schaub again with an answer. He conducted a study on people's attitudes to privacy when it comes to smart speakers. How do people feel about having a smart speaker that could eavesdrop on them?

Florian Schaub

What we often saw is people just **being resigned to** 'this is the trade-off they have to make' if they want to enjoy the convenience that a smart speaker provides to them.

Rob

He said that people **are resigned to** the privacy **trade-off**. If you **are resigned to** something, you accept something unpleasant that can't be changed.

Dan

Yes and a **trade-off** is a compromise. You accept something bad to also receive something good.

Rob

So people accept that a smart speaker gives them advantages, even though there could be downsides?

Dan

Yes. In the grand scheme of things, the data that these devices hear is probably not that significant considering all the data companies have about us already anyway!

Rob

So can I have the answer to the quiz then?

Dan

Of course! Earlier I asked by what percentage the number of smart speakers used in US households increased from December 2017 to December 2018? Was it...

- a) around 40%
- b) around 60%, or
- c) around 80%?

What did you say, Rob?

Rob

I said c) around 80%.

Dan

And you are right. The answer is around 80% - from 66 million in December 2017 to 118 million in December 2018, and around ten million people in the UK now use one too! I guess they're really not worried about **eavesdropping**.

Rob

Nice slide into the vocabulary there, Dan. If someone **eavesdrops** on you, it means they secretly listen to your conversation.

Dan

They could be **eavesdropping** on you through a **bug**, which is a small electronic device used to secretly listen to conversations.

Rob

Yes, they may have **bugged** your most **intimate**, or private and personal, spaces.

Dan

Next we had **circumvent**. If you **circumvent** something, such as security, you cleverly or **bypass** it or go around it.

Rob

Then we had **resigned**. If you **are resigned to** something, it means you accept something unpleasant that can't be changed.

Dan

And lastly, we had **trade-off**. A **trade-off** is a compromise. You get something good, but you also get something bad.

Rob

Right - like 6 Minute English! A great discussion and vocabulary, but the **trade-off** is it only lasts six minutes!

Dan

Which is just about now, actually - time to go. So until next time, find us all over the place online and on social media. Just search for BBC Learning English. Bye for now.

Rob

Goodbye!

VOCABULARY

eavesdrop

secretly listen to someone's conversation

bug

small electronic device used for secretly listening to conversations

intimate

private and personal

circumvent

cleverly bypass or go around

be resigned to

accept an unpleasant situation which cannot change

trade-off

compromise