

Alexa is Listening to You

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There have been a lot of concern lately by privacy advocates over tech companies' data collecting practices and how they try to hide what they do that data and how they collect and store it. There have been many lawsuits launched against companies for illegally collecting user data without the proper consent of said users. One such case recently is the lawsuit against Amazon regarding its virtual assistant Alexa and how it is "spying" on users without their knowledge.

Alexa is a cloud based voice activated virtual assistant made by Amazon meant to help with or fulfill some tasks such as playing music, starting timers, setting timers, and searching the web to answer questions. Alexa is activated when it thinks certain 'wake' phrases are used such as "Alexa" or "Echo". Then it listens to the request and sends it over to Amazon's servers for analysis and receives the answer back. Amazon then stores all these recordings on their servers for future reference and development indefinitely. However, Alexa sometimes thinks it heard a wake phrase which activates its audio recording even though the wake phrase was never used. Meaning that sometimes Alexa will record conversations, send and save them in the cloud, analyze them, determine it was a false alarm or that no request was given, and deactivate without the user ever knowing that Alexa ever did this.

The lawsuit accused Amazon of unlawfully recording and storing users sensitive information including but not limited to medical information and failing to properly disclose their data collection and what they are using it for. A judge ordered Amazon to hand over 4.4 million files, which Amazon calculated, as evidence of the infraction. Amazon failed to provide

a date, time, and expense of producing the files and tried to dodge the court's request by saying it was too burdensome and falls out of the lawsuits scope.

This case relates back to what we have been studying in class. It shows that progress at any cost can be harmful. From Amazon's point of view the the collection of all these voice recordings has promoted and fostered the growth of its voice recognition and analysis artificial intelligence which is great progress. However, if you were to ask Alexa users regarding how Amazon is recording and indefinitely saving their private conversations within their homes even when they were not using Alexa they would regard that as a huge invasion of privacy which is the opposite of progress. This also shows how companies use progress to sell us a certain lifestyle or vision and avoid the implications of that progress.

References

Lenihan, R. (2022, November 1). *Lawsuit alleging Amazon's Alexa is spying on you moves forward*. TheStreet. Retrieved November 5, 2022, from <https://www.thestreet.com/technology/amazon-loses-a-round-in-alexa-privacy-lawsuit>