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Jan 31 · 6 min read

Smart devices are exploiting our convenience. We shouldn't let them



© Amazon

They react to commands such as “Alexa” and “OK, Google”, are elegantly designed and beautiful to behold. Smart speakers are the latest lifestyle craze right now. Over Christmas, nearly everyone seems to have gotten one of the fancy new speakers for their homes. And aren't they wonderful? They willingly obey our every command, always ready to provide us with the latest news, the weather or our favourite music—as long as they get what we are saying. Their stated aim: making our lives more convenient as we chat away with them.

But don't let yourself be fooled by their makers glistening marketing campaigns. These devices are not here to serve us, at least not in the way we expect them to. Or as writer Timandra Harkness put it eloquently on Twitter: “Yes, it's a digital servant in your home. But don't think 'digital Athens', think 'Wolf Hall'. Who are your servants

working for? Not you...". Who then are their true masters if not us? Well—no prizes for guessing—it's, of course, the companies who build them: Google, Amazon, Apple and Co, all the horsemen of the digital revolution.

A Faustian Bargain

It is not that smart speakers aren't a useful addition to our already tech-infused lives. Apple's Siri—once developed as part of an effort to build a virtual office assistant for the US-military—was the proof of concept that voice recognition in combination with AI could help us navigate information and make our life a little less burdensome.

Siri also demonstrated that users were willing to talk to digital assistants, something that previously had only existed in Star Trek. Fast forward a few years and everyone is doing it. And who wouldn't want to admit that it's nice to come home, hands full with grocery bags and shout "Alexa, play me some Diana Krall" to get into that relaxed evening mood? Who cares about gloomy Cassandra's screaming "1984" and "big brother is listening"?

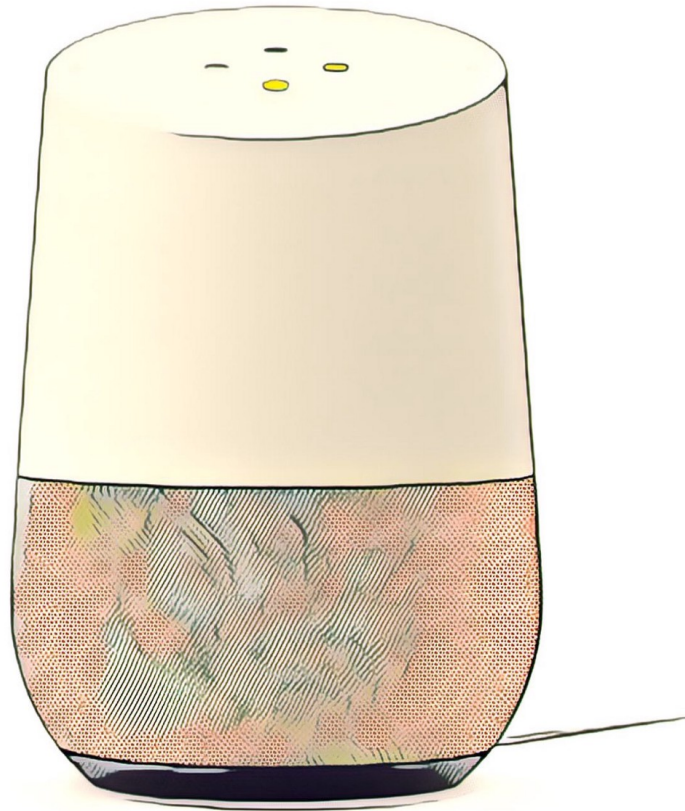
Well, we better should. Unsurprisingly, all this convenience comes with a heavy price tag. As technology makes our lives increasingly comfortable we happily give up even more privacy. Privacy versus convenience is the key trade-off of our time if we are willing to acknowledge it or not. Smartphones, those portable collectors of our data, were the first step. Now we are simply moving to the next level.

Tech companies, even if they claim the opposite, are all too willing to exploit smart devices in the search for new revenue streams. That smart speakers "serve" us is in this context at best thinly veiled tokenism. Amazon wants to drive consumption, Google wants to sell our data so that others can make us consume more. The vision is to have such devices in every part of the house, listening to our every word, all the time.

Surveillance, coming to a home near you soon

In fact, the plans for this are already on the table. A recent study by Consumer Watchdog, a leading US-taxpayer and consumer advocacy, has revealed that Amazon and Google have filed several patent

applications which would dramatically expand the intrusion into our private lives.



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According to the applications, Amazon considers surveilling us even if we don't directly address Alexa. Smart speakers are constantly listening in on our conversations anyway (they have to in order to work), so why not use that extra information to target us and everyone in proximity with related advertising? Or how about slipping a few advertisements into Alexa's replies? Apparently, Amazon is considering that as well.

Google, too has a few neat ideas up its sleeve. For instance, the California-based company would like to connect its Google Home to other Google-produced "smart devices" such as thermostats, light switches and water meters. The result would be a truly networked home which would allow them to make inferences about our behaviour: when (and how often) we eat, work, shower, sleep, flush the toilet, have sex, you name it.

Google's "Nest Cam", on the other hand, could not only be used to detect burglars or to communicate with friends but could potentially generate buying recommendations based on our belongings: "She's into history books? Maybe she also likes 'Downton Abbey'"? It's a potential gold mine for marketers and home insurers—or the state and the odd criminal with hacking skills.

That Google and Amazon have applied to patent these intrusive concepts does, of course, not automatically mean that they will be implemented. But patents reflect a company's thinking and vision for the future. To hope that Amazon, Google, Apple and Co will voluntarily curtail their snooping powers is wishful thinking. Tech companies operate in the interest of shareholders, not users and their privacy. If they can find a new way to harness our data and turn it into revenue, they will exploit it.

Privacy versus convenience

The question if users can explicitly consent to such implementations is entirely beside the point. Just as with Facebook's frequently changing terms of service, the alternatives are "suck it up" or "leave". Either you buy a smart speaker and live with the consequences or you leave it on the shelf. Yet as such devices become part of our economic reality it will be increasingly difficult to avoid them.



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Technological progress, once under full steam, is difficult to stop. We might still be able to push back against the rubber cage, yet in the end, it will still lock us in. Or as David Limp, one of Amazon's senior vice-presidents put it: "Kids today will grow up never knowing a day they couldn't talk to their houses."

The verdict on whether this was meant as a prophecy or a threat is still pending.

If this intrusion into our privacy is to be stopped, we must forsake convenience for security. Rather than hoping for tech companies or regulators to protect us, we should ideally root for the easiest and most effective solution: never to buy a smart speaker in the first place. If such a radical solution can be sustained in the long run is, however, an altogether different question.

If history has shown us one thing then that our convenience commonly trumps privacy concerns. Every child knows what Google does with our data, but hardly anyone opts for alternative search engines. Maybe it's not even the tech companies which are to blame for the impending arrival of full-blown surveillance capitalism. Maybe the answer lies much closer to home: It's us.

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