

## Personal Digital Assistants and Your Privacy - What You Need to Know

February 22, 2017 - In December we told you about a murder case in which prosecutors were subpoenaing voice recordings from Amazon. The recordings were made using Amazon's Alexa personal digital assistant (DA). Police were trying to find out if any of the recordings stored on the company's servers had captured sounds or voices that could help them in their investigation. It turns out that the device using Alexa was owned by the suspected murderer in the case. But Alexa is far from the only DA that exists. And there is a reasonable chance that you own a device that contains a DA that you may not even be aware of. And it may surprise you to learn that these devices may wind up listening to you, recording you, and you may never be aware of it. This raises privacy concerns that simply can't be ignored.

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s.src = 'http://widgets.digg.com/buttons.js';
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})();
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There are a wide variety of DAs on the market today. If you own a smart phone or a computer, you probably have one. Apple has Siri, which is available on iPhones and on apple computers. Android has Google. But many Android devices also have their own branded DAs. For instance, Samsung phones have something called S Voice. Microsoft had Cortana; which is built into Windows 10, Windows phones and is available for download on Android devices. And of course, Amazon has Alexa, which is also available for download on phones.

In addition to your phone and computer, various other devices also contain DAs. Devices like Google Home, Amazon Fire TV, many smart TVs, electronic book readers, etc. Basically, just about any computerized electronic device you buy could contain a DA.

There is no doubt the DAs can be useful. Personally, I use Samsung S Voice just about anytime I send a text message or have to send an email on my cell phone. It's a lot easier for me to talk into the phone than it is to use a small keyboard on my screen. But I know that there is some downside to my privacy.

The problem with all digital assistants is that they can be turned on without your knowledge. DAs are supposed to require you to turn them on. Depending upon your privacy settings, most DAs will turn on when you use a key phrase. For instance, if you are using a Windows 10 computer with a microphone, you can simply say "Hey, Cortana," and a new window will appear. At this point, you can ask Cortana to search the internet, open a program, or do any number of other things for you. So far, so good.

But I've noticed that on my PC, the Cortana window will periodically open up when I haven't activated it. For instance, when I'm talking on the phone, or if there is a TV or radio on in background. I'm not always watching the computer screen when I'm involved in other activities so there is a good chance that Cortana is listening to me at times that I'm not aware

of it. And if it is recording what I say, those recordings are being stored on Microsoft's servers. Not on my computer. It isn't hard to see the privacy issues that this may create.

Fortunately, most DAs allow you to delete any data stored on outside computers. Unfortunately, most people never bother to learn how to do this. And as previously mentioned, there is a good chance that you may have devices with digital assistants that you don't even know about. This means that you could have voice recordings stored in a wide variety of places on the internet.

Just a word to the wise. If you don't use digital assistants on the devices that you own, learn how to disable them. You can find out how to do this with a simple Google search. And if you do use them, you really need to learn how to use them properly. That means periodically looking at what information the DAs you use are storing and deleting any information that isn't absolutely necessary.

byJim Malmberg

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