

Amazon Sidewalk Raising Privacy Red Flags - What Owners of Echo and Ring Devices Need to Know

June 8, 2021 - it is no secret that big tech companies aren't exactly privacy friendly. Depending upon which type of cell phone you have, Apple and Google track you pretty much everywhere you go. They also watch what you do online and deliver ads accordingly. And Amazon knows just about everything about what people shop for and actually purchase. So it probably won't surprise you to learn that without asking customer permission, they are about to launch a feature that has the ability to further destroy personal privacy. And better yet, Amazon's customers will wind up paying for that privilege.

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s.src = 'http://widgets.digg.com/buttons.js';
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po.src = 'https://apis.google.com/js/plusone.js';
var s = document.getElementsByTagName('script')[0]; s.parentNode.insertBefore(po, s);
})();
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The feature - if you can call it that - is called Sidewalk. In short, Sidewalk will form a separate low-band network for the exclusive use of Amazon and its line of smart home products. It does this by stealing a portion of the home network bandwidth from customers that use Amazon's smart home products like the Echo smart speakers and Ring doorbells.

Sidewalk has been included in these devices since 2018, but it has been dormant. That changes today. Amazon has announced that it is turning Sidewalk on in these devices. And it isn't asking anyone's permission to do so. If you own one of these devices and you don't do anything, Sidewalk will become your new constant companion. But you can opt out, and we advise you to do so.

The purpose of Sidewalk isn't quite clear. Amazon has actually said very little about how it will be used. But it does have the potential to do some good. The company has said that it will extend the reach of the internet by as much as 1/2 mile. That means that areas which up until now couldn't connect to the internet may now have connectivity. If you live in the mountains or in a rural area, Sidewalk could provide some benefits.

But Sidewalk isn't a public ally available network. By that I mean that if you live in one of these areas you can't simply call Amazon and subscribe. The network is for the exclusive use of Amazon and its product line. And since we don't really know what they are going to use it for, that raises a lot of red flags. Just last year, police around the country used Ring video footage more than 20,000 times. That's footage that doesn't require a search warrant for them to access. Sidewalk has the potential to extend that type of surveillance to a much wider area.

If you own an Amazon device and you want to turn Sidewalk off, there are different procedures to use for Ring and Echo

devices. For Ring, in the Ring app open the menu, select Control Center and then select Sidewalk. For Echo, open the Alexa app, select More, then Settings, the Account Settings, then Amazon Sidewalk.

If you decide later that you want to turn the service back on, you can follow these procedures again to reverse the process.

by Jim Malmberg

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