

EFF Issues Warning on Smart Locks and Privacy

April 17, 2023 - Smart locks have been around for a few years now. They are another smart-home appliance and working with smart-home hubs such as Amazon's Alexa. In short, they allow you to link your front door lock to the internet and control them from just about anywhere. They can be a handy appliance in the event you need to let a repairman into your home when you're not there, or in the event you lock yourself out but still have access to your home. But as with just about everything else these days, they can also raise privacy concerns. And the EFF is now sounding a warning about them.

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})();
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Of particular concern is that smart locks can establish a record of your comings and goings from home. And just about anyone who gets their hands on that record can learn much about you. For instance, they'll quickly learn if you leave for work everyday at a specific time and when you typically return home. That's handy information for someone that may be casing your home for a burglary. And it may also be handing information for law enforcement agencies conducting an investigation.

There really aren't any controls on this data who can gain access to it either. You have no way of knowing how long the data will be stored, and little control over it. And if the company that's storing the data wants to sell it to the highest bidder, there isn't anything preventing them from doing that.

The convenience factor that comes with smart locks has been especially compelling to landlords. Many apartment buildings are now installing them. They're being marketed as a smart-home feature for tenants, but landlords really want them because of the access they can provide. When there is a need for a repairman to enter an apartment unit, smart locks allow for this even if the tenant isn't going to be there. In the not-too-distant past, under these circumstances the landlord would have had to be present. But with a smart lock installed, those days are gone.

Unfortunately for the tenant, their personal privacy is destroyed in the process. The data associated with the locks may even be shared directly with the landlord.

In 2019, tenants in a New York City complex sued over the use of smart locks. There were able to force a settlement in their case that guaranteed tenants the right to have a keyed lock instead of the smart lock on their units. But that was only one case, and it only impacts the tenants and the landlord at that one location. There are now hundreds of

thousands of smart locks in use.

Without any current laws to protect consumers, it is up to consumers to protect themselves. Tenants who already have these locks installed should consider asking their landlord for a keyed option. At the very least, they should ask what information is being collected about them, how it is being used and who has access to it. And prospective tenants should be asking anyone they are considering renting from if they will be required to use a smart lock. If the answer is yes, they may want to consider renting elsewhere.

by Jim Malmberg

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