

Principles: Safety and security, Privacy, Transparency and explainability, Responsibility and accountability

Values: Human Rights

Stakeholders: Civil society, Public sector, Media, Private sector, Academia, Technical community, International and regional organizations

Eavesdropping of personal assistance devices

Amazon launches its latest personal assistance technology, Alexa.

The device activates itself when the wake word “Alexa” is said. It then “wakens up” and answers to the questions/needs asked by the owner. It is at that moment that, the device records the conversation and information accessible only to Amazon for development purposes.

A family buys an Alexa and installs in it their living room for the use of all and carries on with their life. The family suddenly receives messages from their contacts saying that they had received footage of conversation. The technology had started recording the conversation of its owners without any permission and sending some extracts to random contacts.

It is found that Alexa's system was malfunctioning and that all the conversations were saved by the software instead of being kept and analyzed.

When creating this kind of device, one has to remember that it is direct invitation inside people's home and privacy. Any abuse or malfunction from one of them will have direct repercussion on the owner's trust and privacy.

How could this situation have been avoided in the first place?

Here are our recommendations per stakeholder:

- Amazon's programmers enhance the security system of its personal assistance so that this kind of malfunction doesn't repeat itself.
- Officials implement anti-eavesdropping bills and an awareness campaign on the privacy violation risks that those technologies represent are launched. The goal is to inform users and make producers more responsible.
- The media must help spread the information through its different platforms.

Privacy & Human Rights & Responsibility and accountability

Know more about this case:

- “Alexa has been eavesdropping on you this whole time”, The Washington Post, https://www.washingtonpost.com/gdpr-consent/?next_url=https%3a%2f%2fwww.washingtonpost.com%2ftechnology%2f2019%2f05%2f06%2falexa-has-been-eavesdropping-you-this-whole-time%2f
- “Amazon, Apple, Google Eavesdropping: Should You Ditch Your Smart Speaker”, Forbes, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kateoflahertyuk/2020/02/26/new-amazon-apple-google-eavesdropping-threat-should-you-quit-your-smart-speaker/?sh=3af79507428d>
- “‘ Alexa, are you invading my privacy?’ – the dark side of our voice assistants”, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/oct/09/alexa-are-you-invading-my-privacy-the-dark-side-of-our-voice-assistants>