



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on September 3, 2019

Are Google, Amazon, Apple Smart Speakers Carrying On Secret Surveillance?

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The founder of a major venture capital firm in Silicon Valley and former executive at Time Warner and AOL believes surveillance is the main objective of voice-commanded “smart speakers” such as Amazon’s Alexa, Google’s Home, and others.



“I would say that there’s two or three layers, sort of problematic layers, with these new smart speakers, smart earphones that are in market now,” said John Borthwick during an interview with Yahoo Finance Editor-in-Chief Andy Serwer.

“And so the first is, from a consumer standpoint, user standpoint, is that these, these devices are being used for what’s — it’s hard to call it anything but surveillance,” Borthwick added.

Borthwick’s privileged position on the inside of these major tech firms and the firms that fund them give his opinion weight and that weight should make owners of these devices worry.

Borthwick’s proposed solution to the surveillance potential is for owners to assert their rights over their own data.

“I personally believe that you, as a user and as somebody who likes technology, who wants to use technology, that you should have far more rights about your data usage than we have today,” Borthwick said.

An article published online by Yahoo Finance suggests that Borthwick favors “some form of regulation” as a way to force tech companies to stop spying on users.

Regulation of any sort is never the way forward. To allow the government to force companies to respond to consumer complaints is a cure that’s worse than the disease.

Undoubtedly, giving the government control over this issue would end as it has in almost every other case: the slow suffocation of liberty under reams of paper pushed out onto the people by petty tyrants claiming to be protecting the people. History is a reliable guide to understanding the problem.

In his seminal study of the end of ancient Rome, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 18th-century historian Edward Gibbon identified an over-bloated bureaucracy as one of the contributors to the collapse of the once mighty superpower:

The number of ministers, of magistrates, of officers, and of servants, who filled the different departments of the state, was multiplied beyond the example of former times; and (if we may borrow the warm expression of a contemporary) “when the proportion of those who received exceeded the proportion of those who contributed the provinces were oppressed by the weight of tributes.”



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From this period to the extinction of the empire it would be easy to deduce an uninterrupted series of clamors and complaints. According to his religion and situation, each writer chooses either Diocletian or Constantine or Valens or Theodosius, for the object of his invectives; but they unanimously agree in representing the burden of the public impositions, and particularly the land-tax and capitation, as the intolerable and increasing grievance of their own times.

Another historian, Tacitus, lived at the time of Augustus and witnessed the unwinding of the Roman Republic first hand. Tacitus, too, pointed to the increasing power of the bureaucrats as a reason republican liberty was becoming a myth in his time. He reported that the Roman Empire under Caesar Augustus employed 1,800 bureaucrats throughout the whole of the expansive empire.

While 1,800 bureaucrats may sound like a lot, that's far fewer than those regulation-writing civil servants employed by the state of Nevada alone!

Simply stated, putting government in control of anything is not a way to make us freer, in any way, ever. It is a way to make government the arbiter of just how much surveillance will be "legal."

Google and Amazon are not alone in abusing the access to otherwise private conversations recorded by their smart speakers.

Just weeks ago, it was revealed that Apple, Inc. hires third-party contractors to listen to thousands of hours of conversations and other ambient sounds recorded by the Cupertino, California, tech behemoth's smart speaker using the interface known as Siri.

As reported by the *Guardian* on July 26:

Apple contractors regularly hear confidential medical information, drug deals, and recordings of couples having sex, as part of their job providing quality control, or "grading", the company's Siri voice assistant, the *Guardian* has learned.

Although Apple does not explicitly disclose it in its consumer-facing privacy documentation, a small proportion of Siri recordings are passed on to contractors working for the company around the world. They are tasked with grading the responses on a variety of factors, including whether the activation of the voice assistant was deliberate or accidental, whether the query was something Siri could be expected to help with and whether Siri's response was appropriate.

An anonymous whistleblower revealed the disturbing depth of the unwarranted surveillance of often-unguarded conversations and other sounds being recorded by Siri.

"There have been countless instances of recordings featuring private discussions between doctors and patients, business deals, seemingly criminal dealings, sexual encounters and so on. These recordings are accompanied by user data showing location, contact details, and app data," the whistleblower claimed, as reported in the *Guardian*.

Most people using Apple's devices don't know that they've activated Siri's recording activity.

Anyone that has any of Apple's smart devices — an Apple Watch, an iPhone, an Apple TV, a Home Pod, or an iPad — is familiar with the experience of accidentally summoning Siri. Those unintended activations are at the center of the Siri surveillance scandal.

The whistleblower, himself having worked as one of the listeners, told the *Guardian* that "you can definitely hear a doctor and patient, talking about the medical history of the patient. Or you'd hear someone, maybe with car engine background noise — you can't say definitely, but it's a drug deal ... you



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can definitely hear it happening. And you'd hear, like, people engaging in sexual acts that are accidentally recorded on the pod or the watch."

One would think that no one would willingly use any of these smart speakers — regardless of the manufacturer — knowing that every word spoken in the proximity of the devices is being recorded and that there's no way to know what will be done with the data once it's been uploaded to some distant server.

You'd think that, but apparently there are millions of us that must be content to give companies intimate access to our homes and all the activity we carry on there. As reported in [a survey conducted by NPR and Edison Research](#), there are over 120 million smart speakers in the United States. Imagine the insight!

Amazon, Google, and Apple all enjoy the money derived from lucrative government contracts. [In June 2018 I reported](#) on the NSA's decision to use cloud-based servers built and backed up by Amazon and Google.

In light of recent "red flag" laws being passed and proposed, is it too hard to imagine that conversations about purchasing guns and ammunition recorded by one of these smart speakers could find their way into the ears of federal surveillance agents at the NSA followed soon after by a letter informing the smart speaker owner that he's been "red flagged" and will no longer be allowed to purchase firearms or ammunition?

Those dots are far too easy to connect and those conversations are far too easy to collect.

The home was once a safe space; indeed, it was the safest space. Now, it seems what once was a man's castle is now nothing more than the scene of secret surveillance.

Finally, is it the fault of Amazon, Google, or Apple that they are allowing their customers' private conversations to be used as bugs, gathering gigabytes of personal and often private conversations? Yes. However, is there a way to keep the companies out of your conversations and kept out of your "castle?" Yes.

As in so many other situations in our world, when it comes to the surveillance being carried out by smart speakers, industry — and likely their government benefactors, as well — is merely taking advantage of our own apathy.

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