

Why privacy debate Echoes in Internet of Things?

What's the news?

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- Investigations into the murder of a man whose body was found in a bathtub has had American law-enforcement officials thinking outside the box in collecting evidence.

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- The victim (Victor Collins), had an Amazon Echo personal assistant device — and the [police want Amazon to turn over all recordings from around the time of death.](#)

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Was there any precedence?

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- The request is a first of its kind. And predictably, it has run into resistance from multiple privacy groups.

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How does Amazon Echo functions?

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- Amazon Echo is an Internet-connected speaker that functions just like the digital assistant on your phone. The technology that powers Amazon Echo is Alexa, which allows you to control the device with your voice.

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- The device listens to voices and noise in its range, and sends audio data back to Amazon servers for processing, just like Siri or Google Assistant.

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What did the investigators say?

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- Investigators in the case argue that since an Amazon Echo is always listening, the device may have picked up conversations that could be crucial to cracking the case.

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- Amazon, on the other hand, says that user conversations are only streamed once the device gets the “wake” command or any another customised command.

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- The voice-activated device has 7 microphones, and is equipped with sensors to hear users from any direction up to about 20 feet.

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What are the major issues here?

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- So far, Amazon has not shared any recordings with law enforcement — which, police say, amounts to obstruction. The incident brings up two different issues.

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- First is [the reach that these Internet of Things \(or IoT\) devices have into our personal lives](#), opening up avenues that state agencies can demand to use, or other elements can exploit.

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- If law enforcement can get Alexa recordings from the Amazon device, what's to stop them from trying to do so again for another crime?

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- The second issue is - While Amazon says that the Alexa device does not stream any audio until it is given the command to wake up, [it has not explicitly told law enforcement that it simply does not have the recordings](#).

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- This keeps alive the possibility that Amazon's personal assistant does indeed stream all audio, even when it has not been given the wake command.

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- [If this is found to be the case, the company would be in gross violation of user trust](#).

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- Amazon does say that users can log into the dashboard and delete either specific or all recordings — however, it also says that doing so may hamper the effectiveness of the device.

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Concluding remarks

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- Irrespective of the final outcome of the Victor Collins case, what is already clear is that there is a strong need for policy and governance in the Internet of Things.

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- Common appliances are becoming smart devices that are constantly gathering data — yet, there is no framework yet for how this data is used, and how it should be handled in the event of a crime.

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- While handing over of email data by companies to law enforcement is commonplace, it does not happen without precedence and a proper legal order.

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- One could argue that data collected by other digital devices should also fall under the same purview.

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