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. Andpredictably, 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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Source: Indian Express

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