Which reveals that smart device brands are harvesting user data



NEWS

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Which, a not-for-profit consumer service, has revealed that a plethora number of smart home devices are using data unbeknownst to homeowners.

Which investigated the data collected by major companies and found that the data they collect tracks the location, economic status, and consumption practises of users. The data taken form a consumer is used to make the products more efficient and streamlined to the consumer, however the data can build a 'profile' of a consumer and the consumer can be hit with more targeted ads. The data can be sold on to other companies to target ads at the consumer.

Which found a different in practises of data collection by Apple and Android products. Google Nest, Bose, and Sonos requested precise location data on Android devices, where as Apple users were only asked this same data by Amazon Echo. This is down to differing business models between Android and Apple, Google garners revenue form advertising while Apple mainly sells hardware. This is particularly prevalent in smart speakers.

In home security, smart cameras and doorbells are using location tracking as a default. On Android apps, Arlo, Eufy and Ring want permission for background location, meaning they could track users even when they are not using the app. All permissions are activated by default and while consumers can opt out, this requires changing the settings and could lead to aspects of the device or app no longer fully working. Which found that Chinese brand Ezviz's devices, had by far the most tracking firms active, these included Pangle, TikTok's business marketing unit, Huawei, as well as Google and Meta.

Most TV brands use a system called automatic content recognition (ACR) to track consumers, it can track you via an app on the system or even through a connected device. Most TV tracking is optional, so a consumer has to agree to it before the brand will do anything. However, LG, Samsung and Sony bundle this up into an 'accept all' button.

Even washing machines are harvesting data, with multiple companies needing users' date of birth – although this is optional on Beko machines, LG and Hoover will not allow use of the app without knowing when customers were born. LG wants the most data of all the washing machine brands, asking for the customer's name, date of birth, email, phone contact book, precise location and phone number. The constant use of data begs the question is it worth the added efficiency of smart home products if the data is also being sold to marketing companies?

Under the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR), companies have to be transparent about the data they collect and how it is processed. The data collected must be relevant and limited to what is necessary for the processing to take place. Google replied to the Which article by saying: "Google fully complies with applicable privacy laws and provides transparency to our users regarding the data we collect and how we use it."

Which recommends a number of tips to protect user's privacy, including opting out of data sharing during set up and checking permissions, or denying access in app or on a phone. Which also recommends deleting recordings form voice recordings and reading the privacy terms and conditions, although this may take a while.