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How to Set Up a Smart Speaker for Privacy

In the face of mounting pressure from advocates and consumers alike, Apple and Google temporarily stopped having human beings review recordings, and all three companies revised their practices, in some cases adding new privacy controls for users.

“There’s a distinction between cloud processing and human intervention,” says Justin Brookman, director of consumer privacy and technology policy at Consumer Reports. “People might talk to a machine in a different way if they knew a human being might hear them.”

The fact that smart speakers can be triggered and start recording when they mishear the wake words for Alexa or Siri adds even more cause for concern.

The good news is if you own a smart speaker, it’s relatively easy to mute the microphone when it’s not being used and delete interactions that have already been recorded.

Here’s how to tweak the privacy settings on your device.

Amazon Alexa

To keep other people from listening: Amazon smart speakers allow you to control whether your device sends information back to the company to help improve Alexa, as opposed to just responding to your commands. Here’s how to make the change.

Open the Alexa app on your smartphone and tap the menu button on the top-left of the screen.

Select Settings > Alexa Privacy > Manage How Your Data Improves Alexa.

Switch off the toggle next to Help Improve Amazon Services and Develop New Features.

Then switch off the toggle next to your name under Use Messages to Improve Transcriptions.

According to Amazon, voice recognition and new features may not work as well when you have the setting turned off.

To mute your speaker: The simplest way to control what your smart speaker hears is to mute it when you're not using it. Of course, the unit won't respond to voice commands until you turn it back on.

You can mute an Amazon Echo by pressing the microphone On/Off button on the top of the device. When this button turns red, the mic is off. To reactivate it, you need to press the button again.

If you have a third-party smart speaker that uses the Alexa digital assistant, consult your manufacturer's instructions to find out how to mute your unit.

To review or delete your recordings: Amazon stores your recorded interactions in the cloud. You have the option of seeing all of these and deleting the contents.

Open the App and select Settings > Alexa Privacy > Review Voice History. That will show you the recordings, which can be searched for a keyword or sorted by date.

There's a button to Delete All Recordings for Today.

To delete all of the recording on the device, tap Date Range > All History. Erasing all the recordings might reduce the smart speaker's ability to recognize your voice. Note also that this setting affects recordings already made; it won't keep the speaker from recording you in the future.

Amazon has also introduced two voice commands to help you manage recordings: "Alexa, delete what I just said," and "Alexa, delete everything I said today." Before you can use the feature, you have to activate it.

On the Alexa app, tap the three bars in the upper left and choose Settings > Alexa Privacy > Review Voice History > and flip the toggle switch to enable deletion by voice.

Apple Siri

To keep other people from listening: Apple says it has put a temporary halt to human beings reviewing recordings of user interactions with Siri, but it will resume the practice in the fall with a coming software update.

Going forward, the company says it will not retain Siri recordings by default, but consumers will be able to opt in to a program that uses audio samples to help improve Siri's capabilities with new settings that will soon be available.

To mute your speaker: The simplest way to control what your smart speaker hears is to mute the device when you're not using it. Of course, the unit won't respond to voice commands until you turn it back on.

Apple's HomePod doesn't have a physical mute button, but you can mute it with a voice command: "Hey, Siri, stop listening." The speaker will remind you that this command will turn off the mic and that you'll have to tap the button on the top to turn the device back on. Then you can say "Hey, Siri, start listening."

Technically, the mic remains on throughout that process to calibrate the speaker's bass response, but the device won't respond to voice commands until you turn the mic back on.

You can also go to the Details page on the Apple Home app and turn off the "Listen for Hey Siri" option.

On the Details page, there's also an option to replace the "Listen for Hey Siri" function with one where you press and hold the button on the speaker to start Siri.

On the same page, you can turn on settings that make the device light up or give an audible signal when Siri is being used.

To review or delete your recordings: For now, Apple doesn't provide a way to view or delete your interactions with Siri or the HomePod without deleting all the information associated with your account.

Google Assistant

To keep other people from listening: Like Apple, Google announced a "global pause" to the practice of listening in on interactions with its digital assistant. But you can still opt out of Voice & Audio Activity, preventing Google from using recordings to improve its speech recognition technology when the operation resumes.

On the Google Home app on your smartphone, open the Account tab from the lower right and select Manage your Google Account.

Tap "Manage your data & personalization," choose Voice & Audio Activity, and switch the toggle off.

To mute your speaker: The simplest and most reliable way to maintain control over what your smart speaker hears is to mute your device when you're not using it. Of course, the unit won't respond to voice commands until you turn it back on.

The Google Home has a mute button, while the Home Max and Home Mini have a toggle switch on the side. If you have a third-party device that uses Google Assistant, consult your manufacturer's instructions to find out how to mute your unit.

To review or delete your recordings: Google allows you to see the conversations that have been recorded by your smart speaker and delete the contents.

Begin by tapping the Account icon on the lower right of the Google Home app.

Select My Activity to see your individual interactions. You can search by keyword or by date, and delete them individually or in groups.

The most privacy-friendly option is to delete all your activity with a single command.

Tap the three dot icon and choose "Delete activity by." Select All Time and tap Delete to eradicate your entire history.

You can also use a new function that periodically deletes the data for you. To set this up, go to the My Activity page and tap "Choose to delete automatically."

Erasing all the recordings might reduce your assistant's ability to recognize your voice. Note also that this setting affects only recordings already made and won't keep the speaker from recording you in the future.