

Editor's Choice



People stand in front of an Amazon store and protest Amazon’s change in mind to not open an office in Queens, in the Manhattan borough of New York City



Soccer Football - Serie A - Juventus v Frosinone - Allianz Stadium, Turin, Italy - February 15, 2019 Juventus fans before the match REUTERS/Massimo Pinca



Police officers at the INEC office discuss as they prepare for deployment in Yola, Adamawa State



Director and screenwriter Cordula Kablitz-Post and members of the band Die Toten Hosen, Vom, Kuddel, Breiti, Campino und Andi arrive for the screening of the movie “Weil du nur einmal lebst - Die Toten Hosen auf Tour “ (You Only Live Once - Die Toten Hosen on Tour) at the 69th Berlinale International Film Festival in Berlin, Germany, February 15, 2019. REUTERS/



People walk by the U.S. and Mexico border fence at Friendship Park in Tijuana



Media preview of this year’s Academy’s Governors Ball in Los Angeles



Harris, Republican candidate from North Carolina’s 9th Congressional district speaks as U.S. President Trump looks on during a campaign rally in Charlotte



Children on top of an election billboard watch President Muhammadu Buhari as he leaves a mosque after prayers in his hometown Daura

Your Smart Light Can Tell Amazon And Google When You Go To Bed

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor



Amazon Echo is a hands-free speaker you control with your voice. Echo connects to the Alexa Voice Service to play music, provide information, news, sports scores, weather, and more— instantly. All you have to do is ask. But are the devices also collecting your personal information?

(Bloomberg) -- As Amazon.com Inc. and Google work to place their smart speakers at the center of the internet-connected home, both technology giants are expanding the amount of data they gather about customers who use their voice software to control other gadgets. For several years, Amazon and Google have collected data every time someone used a smart speaker to turn on a light or lock a door. Now they're asking smart-home gadget makers such as Logitech and Hunter Fan Co. to send a continuous stream of information. In other words, after you connect a light fixture to Alexa, Amazon wants to know every time the light is turned on or off, regardless of whether you asked Alexa to toggle the switch. Televisions must report the channel they're set to. Smart locks must keep the company apprised whether or not the front door bolt is engaged. This information may seem mundane compared with smartphone geolocation software that follows you around or the trove of personal data Facebook Inc. vacuums up based on

your activity. But even gadgets as simple as light bulbs could enable tech companies to fill in blanks about their customers and use the data for marketing purposes. Having already amassed a digital record of activity in public spaces, critics say, tech companies are now bent on establishing a beachhead in the home. "You can learn the behaviors of a household based on their patterns," says Brad Russell, who tracks smart home products for researcher Parks Associates Inc. "One of the most foundational things is occupancy. There's a lot they could do with that."



Some device makers are pushing back, saying automatic device updates don't give users enough control over what data they share, or how it can be used. Public guidelines published by Amazon and Google don't appear to set limits on what the companies can do with the information they glean about how people use appliances. Amazon and Google say they collect the data to make it easier for people to manage their home electronics. Automatic status updates reduce the time it takes to process voice commands and lets smart-home hubs present up-to-date information on a screen or smartphone app. Greater awareness of what's going on also lets them proactively suggest helpful uses for their voice assistants, and develop new ones. Smart speakers are among the fastest growing categories of consumer electronics, led by Amazon's Echo and Google's Home devices. That's pushed the companies and their Alexa and Assistant software deeper into debates about the tradeoffs between useful services and the harvesting of personal data. Both have had public pratfalls around privacy of voice commands, either recording private messages in error or sending them to others. The commercial success of voice assistants has bolstered dozens of companies working to build interest in internet-enabled televisions, kitchen appliances and other devices. Many people first start tinkering with connected appliances after buying a smart speaker surveys show about a quarter of U.S. smart speaker owners regularly use them to control something else, a percentage analysts expect to rise. When smart speakers first hit the market, using them to command another device worked like this. After receiving the command "Alexa, turn on the light," the software would ask the light bulb maker's servers for the current status of the bulb. After a reply came back confirming the switch was off, Alexa would instruct the light to turn on. Now, in a push that accelerated last year, Amazon and Google are recommending—and, in some cases, requiring—that smart home makers tweak their code to reverse that relationship. Instead, the light

bulb must report in to the hub with its status at all times.



"Oversharing for the sake of oversharing is probably never a good thing," says Ian Crowe, a senior director with Logitech International S.A., a builder of computer and home electronics accessories. "We should have a good reason, and our users should agree it's a good reason," before sharing data. Logitech has tried to meet Amazon and Google halfway. Rather than tell smart speakers what each device connected to Logitech's Harmony remote controls were doing, Crowe says Logitech reports back with broad descriptions, specifying that a user is watching television instead of passing on information about their choice of channel, for instance. "There are very relevant concerns about how much the system knows," he says. Crowe says Logitech has had conversations about status reporting with Amazon and Google, but declined to detail them. Executives at two other smart device makers, speaking on the condition of anonymity to protect business relationships, say they've asked for concessions from Amazon and Google related to user privacy or transparency and guarantees about use of the data, but been rebuffed. An Amazon spokesman says the company doesn't sell user data and doesn't use information it gets from status reports for advertising. Status reports, he says, are designed to enable useful features for customers. He declined to comment on how long Amazon stores the data. A Google spokesman declined to comment on the company's implementation of status updates. Russell, the analyst with Parks Associates, calls status reporting "a bit of a Trojan Horse request." Amazon and Google, he says, are suggesting "Hey, help us help you by giving us the status of your device, and make everyone's life easier." But what they're not saying is, "Gee, we can do a lot with that data." Even light fixtures, in elaborate setups, are a map of home life: When do you get home? When does the light in your child's bedroom usually go off? What days do you burn the midnight oil? Still,

the nascent smart-home market is fiercely contested, and some critics acknowledge their worries about data collection are partly motivated by concerns that Amazon and Google will use their central position to muscle out rivals and dictate terms to the rest of the market.



Portal from Facebook.

Moreover, some other smart-home companies themselves gather status reports, though they lack the scale or billion-dollar advertising businesses of the tech giants. Meanwhile, plenty of companies say they are on-board with status reporting. Matt McPherson, an engineering manager with Hunter Fan Co., says that before the advent of status reports, device sometimes shut down without answering the user's command. "Do I think these guys are intentionally grabbing data in order to find some way of advertising?" he asks. "At this moment I don't think so, but I can see something of that nature happening in the future." Some say Amazon and Google would do well to be more transparent by telling users, outside of the confines of lengthy privacy policies, what data they're collecting and offering more fine-grained options for managing it. Amazon and Google let users delete accumulated smart-home data, but neither offers an option to stop collecting it from specific devices in the first place. Currently, the only way customers can disable data sharing for a specific device is to unplug it from the system. "We know that there are consumer concerns, deeper than what's been written about, about how much listening is really going on by any voice system," says Martin Plaehn, who runs Control4 Corp., a manufacturer of home automation technology. People intuitively understand that by asking a voice assistant to control a device, they're giving that company information about that action, he says. It's less likely they know that linking a television to the system begins a process of transmitting updates when someone changes the channel or turns it on or off. "There isn't an implicit permission of, 'Go ahead and take all my data whenever [something] changes,'" Plaehn says. "And we think that if the world really knew that was going on, it would create a real kerfuffle." (Courtesy <https://www.bloombergquint.com>)

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**Government Shutdown Curtails
F.D.A. Food Inspections**

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor



The F.D.A. has cut back inspections at manufacturing and processing plants for fruits, vegetables, seafood and other foods during the federal government shutdown. (Photo/The New York Times)

WASHINGTON — The Food and Drug Administration has stopped routine food safety inspections of seafood, fruits, vegetables and many other foods at high risk of contamination because of the federal government’s shutdown, Dr. Scott Gottlieb, the agency’s commissioner, said on Wednesday.

F.D.A. inspectors normally examine operations at about 160 domestic manufacturing and food processing plants each week. Nearly one-third of them are considered to be at high risk of causing food-borne illnesses. Food-borne diseases in the United States send about 128,000 people to the hospital each year, and kill 3,000, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Domestic meat and poultry are still being inspected by staff at the Agriculture Department, but they are going without pay. The F.D.A. oversees about 80 percent of the nation’s food supply, as well as most overseas imports.

In a series of tweets, Dr. Gottlieb said he was taking steps to restore food safety surveillance inspections and to cover more of the high-risk sites as the shutdown continued. He said he hoped to bring back about 150 inspectors who had been furloughed during the shutdown, perhaps as early as next week.

Dr. Gottlieb said he was still trying to figure out how that could be achieved. “These are people who are now furloughed and can collect unemployment insurance or take a second job,” he said. “If we pull them in and tell them they have to work, they can’t collect. I have to make sure I’m not imposing an undue hardship.”

Food safety advocates said they were worried that outbreaks would not be prevented without inspections, or would not be caught at the earliest warning signs.

December
26
FEMA tells contractors to stop work.

January
2
Smithsonian museums close.

December
27
S.E.C. slows reviews of stock offerings.

January
3
F.C.C. suspends most operations.

December
28
F.D.A. stops routine inspections.

January
4
T.S.A. workers call in sick.

“These are inspections where they catch issues before people get sick,” said Sarah Sorscher, deputy director of regulatory affairs at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, an advocacy group. “The announcement that they are going to try to start up high-risk inspections is a positive step. But, we’ve had outbreaks from foods

that are not high risk — from flour, from packaged foods. So I think that the fact that two-thirds of establishments are not going to be inspected is still a problem.”

The F.D.A. inspects food companies for bugs, rodents, mishandled food, improper preparation and other hazards.

Dr. Gottlieb said that inspections of overseas products have continued, despite the furloughs. He also said that the agency has maintained surveillance of some domestic producers who have had a history of problems or pose risks for other reasons.

Soon after the shutdown began, the F.D.A. gave inspectors access to a central expense account so they could continue traveling while avoiding large personal credit card bills without knowing when the government would reimburse them.

The agency, part of the Department of Health and Human Services, is not dependent on federal funding for all of its activities. It receives much of its support from

user fees imposed on the pharmaceutical, medical device, generic drug and other industries it regulates.

Although about 41 percent of the staff is now furloughed because the agency had not received its federal appropriations before the shutdown, those in jobs supported by user fees have remained at work. But even those departments have taken a hit, as the F.D.A. has had to shift priorities for some duties.

Number of federal workers at agencies affected by the shutdown per 10,000 workers

State	Workers per 10,000
Md.	137
D.C.	926
N.M.	127
Wyo.	131
Mont.	127
S.D.	104

In the pharmaceutical section, for example, some officials who generally consider pending drug applications are now work-

effects of drugs or other problems.

“We have a deep concern about those employees who were furloughed, their inability to fulfill their public health functions, and the tremendous personal impact that it has on them,” said Ladd Wiley, executive director of the Alliance for a Stronger F.D.A., a nonprofit advocacy group. “We are also grateful to the roughly 10,000 employees who are retained and working.”

But, Mr. Wiley added, his organization also was concerned about nonemergency functions that the F.D.A. has had to put aside. Among the important work being delayed right now, he noted, are manufacturing inspections, technical assistance and advice to the produce industry — especially guidance for preventing contamination — and activity related to food additives.

“There is a whole list of things that are not getting done,” he said.

Some public health experts were worried about the impact of the shutdown on inspection of fish. Andrew Rosenberg, director of the Center for Science and Democracy at the Union of Concerned Scientists, said he was concerned about contaminated shellfish ending up on store shelves during the shutdown.

In particular, he said, consumers should watch out for clams, mussels, oysters and other bivalves that may come from contaminated water. “It can be very nasty stuff,” said Dr. Rosenberg, a former official with the seafood inspection program run by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. “It can be anything from E. coli to Vibrio. It is important for people to look for an inspection certificate.”

The F.D.A. has cut back inspections at manufacturing and processing plants for fruits, vegetables, seafood and other foods during the federal government shutdown. (Photo/The New York Times)

He noted that the NOAA website says the inspectors are working without pay; so are meat and poultry inspectors, according to the Department of Agriculture. Michael Halpern, deputy director of the science and democracy center, thinks that’s a problem not just for the workers but for consumers if the furloughed inspectors turn to temporary jobs to support themselves, creating a shortage.

“We have food outbreaks even during normal times, and if the agency is stretched even thinner, it can’t cover much ground,” he said.

One of the most prominent food-borne illness outbreaks recently involved romaine lettuce. In an odd bit of timing, the C.D.C. issued a statement on Wednesday noting that the latest spate of problems from contaminated romaine began in October, sickening 62 people in 16 states and the District of Columbia.

The C.D.C. and the F.D.A. traced some of the contamination back to Adam Brothers Farming in Santa Barbara County, Calif., citing E. coli traced to an agricultural reservoir there. The F.D.A. issued a separate statement saying that it would continue to investigate the source, even though the C.D.C. has declared the outbreak to be over.(Courtesy the New York Times)

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