Echoes of Murder

Scenario

Amazon’s Alexa, like Apple’s Siri, Microsoft’s Cortana, or Google’s AI assistant are cloud services that are generally activated when their ‘wake word’ is spoken. The user can then speak their request aloud, “Alexa, what’s the weather like today?” and their question or request will then be processed in the cloud. Alexa is generally hosted in Amazon’s Echo or Echo Dot and are part of a growing generation of devices called the Internet of Things (IoT), everyday objects embedded with computing devices that enable them to send and receive data.

The ubiquitous spread of Alexa and other IoT devices has caused some to worry about privacy, especially after director of national intelligence James Clapper testified that intelligence agencies were looking to IoT devices to expand their surveillance capabilities, and it seems that those fears will now be put to the test. In November 2015, Victor Collins was found dead in the house of James Bates. An investigation ensued and an Echo was found in Bates’ home. Police thereafter issued a search warrant to Amazon for all “audio recordings and data” from the device. Amazon subsequently denied law enforcement access to the actual voice recordings. Nor has this been the only new case, police recently used a warrant to retrieve data from Ross Compton’s pacemaker on suspicion that he set fire to his own home to collect the insurance money. There are also questions of whether the device’s source code should be opened up for defense teams to examine. The only thing that does seem certain going forward is that the expansion of IoT devices into our everyday lives will bring with it a multitude of legal and ethical questions.

Assignment

Your job is to write an essay making the case that Amazon’s resistance to law enforcement requests was either ethical or unethical. In your assignment text file (W4/submission.txt), you will find an assigned ethical theory to make your argument from. You should make this argument from only your assigned ethical theory.

Your imagined audience for this essay is a fellow CS student who is not in this class. Assume they have vaguely heard class terms before but aren’t intimately familiar with them, nor are they familiar with the particular situation you are writing about.

Your response should:

- be between 3,000 and 5,000 characters long
- conform to the writing rubric
- be driven by a clear thesis
- address the questions below while remaining one coherent essay, not a series of disconnected answers
- use the resources provided (and any research you care to do on your own) to support your argument

Questions

- If a civilian (i.e. not law enforcement) gained unauthorized access to an IoT device to gain information used in this case, would it violate any statutes discussed in class?
- Should accessing evidence recorded by an IoT device be covered by Third-Party Doctrine? Should accessing it in an investigation require a warrant, a subpoena, or neither?
- When information from an IoT device is used in court, should the proprietary nature of the device be respected, or should the defense be allowed to examine the device and source code?
- Should access to IoT device information be limited to certain kinds of investigations, or should it be a widely used tool for criminal investigation?

References

- Amazon, “Alexa and Alexa Device FAQs” (in essay link)
- Tech.Mic, “Amazon Echo Privacy: Is Alexa listening to everything you say?” (in essay link)
- The Guardian, “The government just admitted it will use smart home devices for spying” (in essay link)
- 5 News Online, “Bentonville PD says man strangled, drowned former Georgia officer” (in essay link)
- 5 News Online, “Privacy advocates raise concerns over Bentonville PD’s warrant for Amazon Echo Recordings”
- NY Mag, “Can an Amazon Echo testify against you?” (in essay link)
- Endgadget, “Police seek Amazon Echo data in murder case (updated)”
- CNN, “Alexa, can you help with this murder case?”
- Fortune, “Police ask Amazon’s Echo to help solve a murder”
- Northwest Arkansas Democrat Gazette, “Man pleads not guilty in case of body found in hot tub”
- Ars Technica, “Ohio man’s pacemaker data may betray him in arson, insurance fraud case” (in essay link)
- ABC News, “Man pleads not guilty in case based partly on pacemaker data”
- Law Enforcement Cyber Center, “Internet of Things Infographic”

Submission
Essays should be anonymous (don't put your name or netid anywhere!). Copy your essay into the submission.txt file in your W5 svn directory and commit the changes; instructions for using svn are available here. Remember that the deadline for writing assignments is Friday at 11:59 pm (October 6th in this case.)