

*Emily Moore*

# I'm All Ears

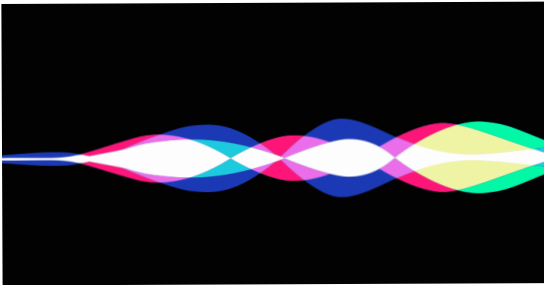
Is Siri always listening in on our  
conversations?



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Mobile devices are a staple of modern life. We have developed a dependency on them. The advent of voice-controlled AI's such as Siri has allowed us to interact with technology like never before, encouraging us to place our lives in the hands of AI. However, the potential danger of this could mean compromised privacy and personal information.



Earlier this year, a whistle-blower who previously worked with Apple revealed that contractors working for Apple were listening to voice recordings of Siri users for grading purposes. Apple operates a program known as Grading, which consists of call centres

full of people working around the world, located primarily in Barcelona, listening to Siri activations. The graders state that users unintentionally activate Siri, either through accidentally saying a word that turns the device on, pushing the home button, or even undoing a zipper. Those graders then check for accidental activations, whether or not the query was transcribed correctly, and whether or not the answer given was the expected answer. The Guardian quoted the Apple contractor: "The regularity of accidental triggers is incredibly high. The Apple watch can record some snippets that will be 30 seconds – not that long, but you can gather a good idea of what's going on." The whistle-blower says there have been "countless" instances of Apple's Siri voice assistant mistakenly hearing a "wake word" and recording confidential information such as "private discussions between doctors and patients, business deals, seemingly criminal dealings, sexual encounters" and more. These recordings often reveal identifying information, such as user data showing location, contact details, and app data. The graders were told these weren't

Apple's business, just ignore it and move on. The graders job was to improve the vendors' speech recognition capabilities, and identifying mistaken recordings is part of that. However, the whistle-blower said, Apple instructs staff to report accidental activations "only as a technical problem", with no specific procedures to deal with sensitive recordings. The contractor states "We're encouraged to hit targets, and get through work as fast as possible. The only function for reporting what you're listening to seems to be for technical problems. There's nothing about reporting the content." This was all done to help improve Siri's quality and her ability to understand you. The problem was Apple never explicitly told anyone that this was happening. The contractor told the Guardian that he or she went public because they were worried about how our personal information can be misused. There's not much keeping track of who works there, and the amount of data that we're free to look through seems quite broad. It wouldn't be difficult to identify the person that you're listening to, especially with accidental trigger – addresses, names

and so on. The contractor wants Apple to be upfront with users about humans listening in.

After the article was written, Apple sent the Guardian this response with regards to the news: "A small portion of Siri requests are analysed to improve Siri and dictation. User requests are not associated with the user's Apple ID. Siri responses are analysed in secure facilities and all reviewers are under the obligation to adhere to Apple's strict confidentiality requirements." Apple also said that a "very small, random subset, less than 1% of daily Siri activations, are used for "grading" – in other words, quality control – and those used are typically only a few seconds long". That lasted about a week, in that week the reaction to the story grew to such an extent that Apple then announced it would make a number of changes. They suspended the program & then 6 weeks later published a completion of review along with apology on their website. "As a result of our review, we realise we haven't been fully living up to our high ideals, and for that we apologise," the company said in a statement. Apple will no longer hold audio recordings of Siri interactions and will use computer-generated transcripts to help Siri improve,

the company announced. Users will be able to opt in to allow their audio recordings to be shared with Apple employees. Only employees will be able to listen to the files and will work to delete recordings that were caused by an accidental trigger of Siri. The company added: "At Apple, we believe privacy is a fundamental human right. We design our products to protect users' personal data, and we are constantly working to strengthen those protections." The Guardian reported that hundreds of contractors have lost their jobs since the grading work was suspended earlier this year. This incident goes to show that one should never get too attached to their mobile devices, as the risk of privacy breaching is quite high.



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## How Siri Breached Our Privacy

