

Is your smartphone helping marketers target you? Take the test

A study by NordVPN shows that there was a 5% increase in the installation of monitoring apps last year. Yet some users suspect that their smartphones are spying on them even if they have no monitoring apps installed. NordVPN says that the 'spying' is true.



Photo by Derick Anies on Unsplash

"Virtual assistants like Siri, Google Assistant, or Alexa listen to their users all the time. They have to constantly listen so they can hear the voice command and assist. However, some of the things people say are being recorded for companies' own benefit, like improving the service quality or for marketing purposes," said NordVPN in a statement.

Daniel Markuson, a digital privacy expert at NordVPN, says: "When you ask Google Assistant or Siri to find something, this information is used for online advertising. It's no different from typing something into Google Search. If you're looking for car dealerships in your city, related ads will start chasing you across the internet. In a way, a virtual assistant is just another search engine."

How to test your phone?

NordVPN says the best way to see if your phone is helping marketers target you is by setting up a trap.

- **Select a good topic.** It should be something that couldn't be associated with your personality, something you never talk about;
- **Isolate the topic from your phone.** Do not use your phone or any other device to search for information on this topic. The best way to do so is to think of it in your head. Make sure you have never googled this topic either;

- **Select keywords.** Think of a list of keywords that could trigger search engines;
- **Discuss the topic out loud next to your phone.** You can do this alone or with someone else for several minutes at a time. Do so a few days in a row. Make sure you don't search for the topic in any other way — your phone's only contact with it should be hearing you talk about it.

Once you set up the trap, notice if any new ads have started targeting you on social media or other digital channels. If they have, then your phone is probably helping these ads reach you.

Is listening to a user legal?

When users use a virtual assistant, they agree to the terms and conditions of the service provider. Since they have given their consent, it's legal to track the conversations with Google Assistant, Siri, Alexa, and others for marketing purposes.

It only becomes illegal if an app is spying on you without your consent. That's why it's essential to review the permissions you're giving specific services and learn about the ways your phone is tracking you.

How can you protect your privacy?

First of all, you should review your app permissions.

"Once access is granted, the app can do whatever it wants with that data. So, build a routine to review your phone's app permissions and think twice before agreeing to an app's demands," emphasises Markuson.



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Some apps might want to access your microphone without any reason. This might allow bad actors to spy on you in the background or collect ad-targeting data when you don't want them listening. Go through your smartphone's settings and make sure that apps can access only the resources needed to do their job.

Also, clear your activities once in a while and turn off the audio recording function. Apple, Google, and other service providers allow the deletion of dictation history. Carefully choose the information you tell your phone in general.

"Don't share too much information with your phone. The less it knows, the better," Markuson concludes.