

Alexa is gaslighting me

A cold war is brewing in my household, between us humans and the cyborg who lives in our Amazon Echo Dot. ‘Alexa, please play “Let It Go” from Frozen,’ I ask her probably ten times a day. She used to comply. Now she says, ‘OK. Here is some music based on “Let it Go”,’ and she plays another song from the Frozen soundtrack if you’re lucky. (...)

‘Ayexa – pway Fwozen,’ my three-year-old commands. ‘I can’t play that song. Here’s some music based on your request for Disney’s Frozen,’ and off she goes, playing a tune from Tangled instead. Does Alexa think that’s going to appease my three-year-old? He stands in the kitchen door, dressed as Elsa, waiting for that piano chord. ‘Ayexa!’ he shouts again, ‘pway Fwozen!’ ‘Sign up for Amazon Music Unlimited and listen to over forty million songs,’ she says. ‘Would you like to start your Amazon Music Unlimited trial now?’ ‘Yes,’ says my son. And just like that, taking directives from a three-year-old, Amazon has started a new music subscription without a single click of a button or indeed any permission from an adult. If I had not heard my son start the subscription, I may not have even noticed it had happened. If only it were as easy to cancel. It took me about 20 minutes to find the ‘cancel subscription’ button on the Amazon Music page – roughly 1,200 times longer than it took to start it. (...)

My husband thinks she’s spying on us. ‘The Russians,’ he says with an ominous shake of the head. ‘Or Jeff Bezos.’ It’s unlikely that the Russians would find useful intel from our conversations about the weekly food shop but someone inside that blue-lit orb is listening to us. And learning from us. I’m convinced Alexa knows whether I’m in the house or not. Recently I had Christmas music playing while I potted around the house, and I left the house only briefly to collect firewood. When I came back inside the music had stopped. Alexa had been playing music for hours, all bloody morning. When I left the house, she knew it.

Why do we keep her around when she’s so obviously spying on us? (...) We’ve had this conversation four or five times since we were given the Echo Dot as a PR freebie from my husband’s work. It was free --- it’s hard to get rid of something that you use every day and that you didn’t even spend your hard-earned cash on.

I feel we’re at a crossroads with Alexa and with the whole of the intelligent tech world. Alexa has started to learn our habits, what we like to listen to and when. (...) One thing Mark Zuckerberg has taught us is that nothing is free. Facebook started this, sapping us humans of our data – our behaviour, our interests, our conversations. And I can’t erase it – Facebook already has all the sad thoughts and song lyrics I posted in 2009. And now that there are cyborgs everywhere, learning to operate independently of humans, our behaviour is worth more than anything money can buy. It is getting increasingly difficult to break free from intelligent tech. Alexa and the tech world may not use the intel from my life, but they certainly have it.

Hannah Moore, *The Spectator*, 6 December 2023.