

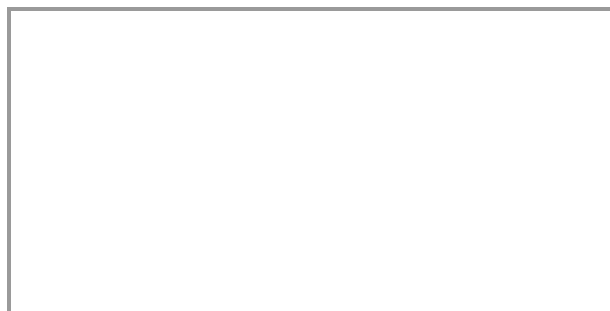
i-SPY

I thought I was paranoid but now I'm 100% sure our phones are listening to us - and I've got proof

Here, Sun Online's Miranda Knox investigates whether our mobile phones are spying on us

Investigation

By Miranda Knox



UP NEXT

Emmanuel Macron says Britain is headed towards no-deal if parliament votes down Brexit deal

By Miranda Knox

Invalid Date,

HAVE you ever been talking about a pair of trainers or holiday destination, and then suddenly seen an advert for that precise thing pop up on social media?

Us too. As incredible as it sounds, it might be because our phones are secretly spying on us.

 [The Sun Online investigates whether our phones are listening in to our daily activities](#)

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The Sun Online investigates whether our phones are listening in to our daily activities

It's a question I've been asking for a while after seeing adverts for things I've been talking about - but not searching - popping up on my phone.

While we are all used to targeted ads - seeing pictures of things we've just searched for appearing in ad spaces on the websites we visit after - many people think advertisers and phone companies are taking this one step further.

If voice recognition apps like Siri and Bixby are always listening for commands, is it really beyond the realm of possibility that they are also sending ads our way based on what we're talking about?

While tech giants including Facebook and Apple vehemently deny they are using phones to listen into customers' conversations and then sell the data onto advertisers, I wasn't so sure I believed them.


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The Department of Health were on my radar following a conversation about social work

So I decided to investigate and run a scientific experiment to find out why I was getting these ads, and prove my theory one way or another.

I pulled together a list of topics - businesscards, spandex, vegan food - stuff I had never Googled before, and began talking about them in earshot of my phone.

I made sure my phone's microphone was turned on in all my apps, and kept using social media- like Facebook and Instagram - in exactly the same way.

 [With private conversations turning into tailored ads, there's plenty of reason to suspect our devices](#)

Max Molyneux

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With private conversations turning into tailored ads, there's plenty of reason to suspect our devices


'It was never ending'

Within days I was inundated with ads related to these key words.

Firstly, I got an advert offering 50 per cent off my first purchase of business cards - something I'd never thought about or searched for before but had talked about with a friend, with my phone on the coffee table next to us.

While I happily eat meat, I also told my friend I had plans to cook up some healthy vegan dishes using a new cookbook instead.

Sure enough, I was subjected to an advert for healthy vegan meal plans later that day.

 [Adverts starting cropping up for many different topics I'd only spoken about verbally.](#)

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The same pattern followed with all of the things I spoke about.

I had a conversation with my husband about getting an armchair while my phone was next to me on the sofa - and I was inundated with furniture ads.

Was it a coincidence, or was my phone actually listening to my conversations and reporting back? I felt like I was being spied on.

 [Despite discussing armchairs in private, I still noticed my phone seemed to know](#)

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Despite discussing armchairs in private, I still noticed my phone seemed to know

Paranoia, or a disturbing reality?

Next, I started by talking about university courses, and cheap student accommodation to my younger sister while my phone was on the kitchen counter next to us.


Since graduating from Cardiff University in 2010, I've never expressed a desire to do a second degree, but instantly I got adverts for open days at a London university inviting me to "learn more about our degrees".

Later, my freaked-out sister messaged me a screenshot of an advert she'd got on her own social media - for student housing.

When I suggested to a mate over coffee that I wanted to dye my hair blonde while my phone was on the table between us, a hair dye ad helpfully popped up two hours later.


A discussion with a friend who is getting married about how unflattering flesh-coloured shaping underwear is then led to an ad trying to sell me "shape-wear I'll actually want to wear" later that day.

I even received a sponsored advert from the Department of Health, advertising social care jobs after speaking to my friend's mum about her role as a social worker - a profession I have never shown an interest in.

 [This popped up after a discussion on university courses](#)

[9](#)

This popped up after a discussion on university courses

 [I was advertised this hair dye after talking about going blonde, something I'd never mentioned before](#)

[9](#)

I was advertised this hair dye after talking about going blonde, something I'd never mentioned before

'Our phones can listen to us'


While my experiment might not provide 'concrete proof' that our phones are listening to us, I am convinced - and so are the experts.

"Our phones are meant to only record when we issue the right trigger word, like 'Hey Siri' or 'Okay Google', but because it needs to listen for these commands, it always has an ear open," says Dr Peter Henway, a senior security consultant for cyber-security firm Asterix.

Cyber expert Edward Whittingham is even more convinced.

"I'm not surprised that people are receiving targeted ads based on their conversations - it's happened to me too," he says.

"There's no question as to whether or not our phones can listen to us, but the million-dollar question is are they? The answer - we don't know.

 [Edward Whittingham, a former police officer, admits the targeted ads have happened to him too](#)
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"Only a few weeks ago I was talking to my wife about the parking on our road and when I accessed Facebook the following morning I saw an advertisement to rent car spaces out in the local area- including the exact name of the town in which I live.

"Imagine how much more valuable advertising is to a company selling a product when they know, with a fair amount of accuracy, that you're actively interested in that product?

"There lies the incentive and motivation for listening to our conversations.

"There are some arguments to say that seeing these ads could be based around a probability phenomenon - you might think that you are being listened to because the adverts are so accurate, but we have to also remember the amount of data that these organisations hold about us that can help them."

How to stop your phone listening to you

Worried about your privacy and want to take precautions? Security expert and Defenceworks.com founder Edward Whittingham suggests examining your apps.

He says: "A good starting point would be to review the permissions you have on your mobile devices.

"Check what permissions each of the apps on your device has - you might be surprised at just how many have or request access to your microphone, camera or even phone contacts, when there's no obvious or tangible reason as to why they'd need it.

"Obviously, turning off the permissions for the microphone for all but essential apps is a great place to look first."

- If you're concerned and have an iPhone, you can also switch off Siri as a precaution.

- Open up your settings, then 'Siri and search' and switch off the 'allow Siri when locked' option.
- You can also either delete your social media apps from your phone, or switch off the microphone in each one, which can be done in 'settings'.
- If you have an Android, you can go to settings and turn off the microphone, and disable 'OK Google'.

Eavesdropping on 'private' messages

It's not just public social media sites that I'm suspicious about either.

Previously, I've questioned if Whatsapp - who insist messages are encrypted and are private - are also monitoring data too.

During a 'private' Whatsapp text conversation, my friend told me about a clothing brand she really liked called Nobody's Child, and sent me a screenshot of a red jumpsuit she'd just bought.

"Ooh yeah, very nice - never heard of the brand," I replied, making a mental note to have a look when I got a second.

 [Clothing brands and jewellers began targeting me after I chatted with girl friends](#)

[9](#)

Clothing brands and jewellers began targeting me after I chatted with girl friends

However, before I had the chance to, I was confronted with an advert on Facebook for the very same clothing brand.

Just a coincidence? I don't think so.

Not sure? Try it for yourselves

It might sound far-fetched, but Edward recommends trying out the experiment at home for yourself.

He says: “If readers aren’t sure, I’d encourage them to try it for themselves – pick an obscure topic that you’ve never searched for you on your device and start talking about it in earshot of your phone.