

Privacy: J. Edgar's Not The Hoover You Need to Worry About Anymore

Is your vacuum cleaner spying on you? Hamza Shaban of the *Washington Post* reports that iRobot, maker of the “autonomous” Roomba vacuum, may eventually sell the internal maps of your home the device builds to facilitate its work to the makers of other “smart home” devices.

In the latest phase of our frenzied technological advancement, it's clear that yes, our gadgets do collect and use more and more information about us, and that that information progressively ramifies across more, bigger, and more integrated networks.

The bigger question: Is it worth it?

The answer: It depends.

Benjamin Franklin cautioned us against “giv[ing] up essential liberty, to purchase a little temporary safety.” If he lived today, I think he'd be fascinated by the Internet of Things — and that in updating the quote above to describe it, he'd likely substitute “privacy” and “convenience” for “liberty” and “safety.”

I'm not going to try to tell you not to buy an autonomous vacuum or smart thermostat or Amazon Alexa voice-activated device (I have a couple of those myself). They can be incredibly useful. They can make our lives better in significant ways.

But when weighing the associated costs, don't forget to account for the risks inherent in sharing your information. Who's gathering it? What will be done with it? Where will it end up, intentionally or otherwise? The commercial applications, however annoying and intrusive they might become, aren't the half of it.

One not terribly far-out, if somewhat dystopian, prediction:

As autonomous vacuums and similar map-reliant devices become the norm (and as they get cheaper, that will happen), governments will become major customers for the information they gather. The obvious application for that data is law enforcement (for example, being able to call up the floor plan of a house when planning a search or raid). But you should also expect that your county assessor will use that information when calculating square footage for your tax bill, and don't be surprised if city planning and zoning bureaucrats come knocking to talk about that addition you built without a permit.

And then, of course, there's the criminal element (but I repeat myself). The same people who stole your credit card number at the gas pump last year may acquire and use this type

of information to case your house for prospective burglary next year.

Watch yourself. And never forget that your stuff is watching you too.