

# California bill aims to warn consumers about recording TVs

August 20 2015, by Julia Horowitz

---

Readers who scanned the user manual for a new Samsung smart TV may have been surprised to learn their household conversations could be recorded without their knowledge.

State Assemblyman Mike Gatto certainly was.

"The passage was almost word-for-word comparable to a passage of the book '1984,'" Gatto, D-Glendale, said, referring to a line in the [privacy policy](#) that said conversations, including personal or sensitive information, could be captured and transmitted to a third party if users turned on wireless voice recognition.

After taking a lashing in the media and online, the company changed its policy and the user manuals in February. Samsung now says it will only record voice commands if a user clicks an activation button and talks into the remote or a microphone.

Still, Orwellian anxieties have already taken hold, and Gatto's Committee on Privacy and Consumer Protection is pushing a bill to rein in spying TVs before the problem becomes worse.

His AB1116 is the first legislation of its kind in the United States, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. After unanimous passage in the Assembly, the bill now goes before the full Senate before the Legislature finishes on Sept. 11.

It would require that users be explicitly informed when their smart TVs are installed that the devices could start collecting conversations.

It also forbids TV manufacturers and related third parties from using or selling stored conversations for advertising purposes, and would allow manufacturers to reject [law enforcement](#) efforts to use the feature to monitor conversations.

Samsung declined to answer questions from The Associated Press but said in a written statement that it supports Gatto's legislation.

"Protecting our consumers' privacy is one of our top priorities. Our TVs are designed with privacy in mind," the company said in a written statement.

Despite the bill's limited scope—it requires prominent notification but allows manufacturers to decide what is sufficiently explicit—Gatto said he has struggled to garner support from the technology manufacturing industry and said it was "news to us" that Samsung now supports it.

Privacy experts say the changes, while important, may not go far enough to protect consumers.

Potential uses for the information could go "way above and beyond advertising," said Jim Dempsey, director of the University of California, Berkeley's Center for Law and Technology.

The information collected could still be used to make psychological or cultural assessments of people for insurance or customer relations companies, he said, noting that human resources companies already use automated systems to profile callers based on their voices.

"It could determine what kind of offers you get made," Dempsey said.

The legislation is also technology-specific—a potential issue as voice control spreads to other technologies such as cars, Dempsey noted. He said the bill also makes no mention of how long conversations or transcripts may be stored by the third party.

Storage is so practically impossible that it isn't necessary to make it illegal right now, Gatto said.

The bill does a lot of things right, said Lee Tien, a lawyer for the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a group that advocates for the protection of civil liberties online. The legislation notably acknowledges the risk of spying by law enforcement but may place too much faith in consent policies, he said.

"Notice is not consent," Tien said.

Dempsey agreed, saying "it's not like you're going to change your behavior in your house just because there's a little icon on the screen."

© 2015 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

Citation: California bill aims to warn consumers about recording TVs (2015, August 20)  
retrieved 23 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2015-08-california-bill-aims-consumers-tvs.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--