

# Engineer's 'Smart Speaker Firewall' isolates Alexa devices in a snap

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Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Chuck Carey is an experienced engineer and self-described technophile, but he's also wary of the proliferation of data-hoovering, Internet-connected devices such as the microphone-and-speaker combos used

with digital assistants such as Amazon Alexa and Google Assistant.

"While I have three Echo Dots, I have always been suspicious of what gets collected by them," the Kirkland, Wash., man said. "So I tried to solve that problem: How to keep Jeff's minions out of my private stuff."

Last month Carey posted to GitHub his prototype design for a "Smart Speaker Firewall."

It is a box with a lid. Clap or snap twice—as with one of the original smart home products, the Clapper—and the lid pops open, allowing the device to be used as normal. Clap twice more and it closes and turns on a noise designed to prevent the device's sensitive microphones from detecting anything outside the box. He added a hand-drawn picture of Jeff Bezos inside the box's lid and says at the end of the video, "If you can see Jeff Bezos' picture, Jeff can listen to you."

The firewall, he writes on GitHub, is meant to address "some well documented 'oops' moments, such as ordering unwanted goods, recording conversations that should have remained private, or just annoying folks."

"Most any 8th grader with \$50 could make this in a couple days," he said via email Thursday, sharing the project and the video above after news broke of a lawsuit alleging Amazon's Alexa system is recording children's conversations without consent.

For Carey, who lists 17 patents on his LinkedIn profile and said he was the lead inventor on 11 of them, the project was part of his job search effort. He was laid off in February after more than 12 years at AT&T. He's said he's had a half-dozen phone interviews, including with Lab 126, the Amazon devices subsidiary—Nice people. (Seriously)—but hasn't landed a role yet.

Carey keeps inventing. After a mouse chewed through the water supply to his dishwasher recently, resulting in thousands of dollars of water damage, he started designing an aftermarket sleeve that could be fitted over water lines or power cords to detect and report punctures, pinches or other adverse conditions before a catastrophic failure.

"I am an engineer. I love technology," Carey said, "but I have very little faith in the people who control technology. "

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