

Tiny Personal Assistant Poses Big Risk and Privacy Concerns

Article By:

Theodore F. Claypoole

What if your personal digital assistant was so small but it encompassed your entire home?

If you are wondering how this would be possible, see the new generation of smart assistants designed to be placed into your wall, allowing Amazon Echo-type interaction directly with your house. A half-dollar sized device in key rooms allows homebuilders to offer voice control over current electronic features like security and music, plus whatever applications come next.

A startup company called Josh.ai is offering a niche product designed to be professionally installed in a home to manage interaction between homeowners and digital house services. The tiny device is embedded in the wall and controlled by a central unit. [Tech Crunch reports](#), “The device bundles a set of four microphones eschewing any onboard speaker, instead opting to integrate directly with a user’s at-home sound system. Josh boasts compatibility with most major AV receiver manufacturers in addition to partnerships with companies like Sonos. There isn’t much else to the device; a light for visual feedback, a multi-purpose touch sensor and a physical switch to cut power to the onboard microphones in case users want extra peace of mind.”

Installing one of these systems helps homeowners accustomed to addressing Siri and Alexa interface with voice commands to all domestic systems. In addition, it replaces the button or screen wall interfaces with tiny microphones that promote health with touch-less design and are unlikely to look ugly and outdated when the home is sold years later. Josh’s “nearly invisible” footprint can be an advantage.

The initial Josh business model is interesting because it licenses its installed services to the homeowner and the hardware comes as part of the package. Josh offers licenses to its technology on an annual, five-year, or lifetime basis. And would the longest license be for the lifetime of the home or the lifetime of the owner? Those of us stuck with old wiring and outmoded wall units know the cost and frustration of making changes, and yet, if the technology was still useful when the house is sold, a seller would want to include the right to use it as a fixture. This is especially true if the tech controls all the *other* tech in the house.

If you are building the tech into your home, I would expect that longer licenses would be more desirable. But the licensing model still leaves open the risk that you build this system into your home

and are unable to pass it along to the next owner. Further, buying this technology from a start-up involves a very real possibility that the company doesn't exist by the time you sell your home, or that its business models have changed and it no longer supports your hardware.

It also acclimates us to a microphones-everywhere lifestyle where the listening devices are built right into the walls, turning all of our future homes into versions of the [U.S. embassy in Moscow](#). Yes, the Josh wall unit includes an "off" button, but will we always remember to use it, and will it always work in the manner expected? And will Josh make arrangements with police departments like famous in-home security systems that will allow the police to turn on these microphones and listen in to your home? If so, will the police need a warrant to do so, or just an interest in knowing what is happening inside your home?

The Josh system is a natural evolution of the personal digital assistant, but legal, privacy, and risk concerns cast a shadow on wide adoption.

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