Tech Tips

Digital Assistants and Smart Home Devices

By Harris R. Greenberg

You can start living like the Jetsons today! A good "smart home" hub, coordinating the actions of several smart devices, can get automated directions from your smartphone, like turning on the lights when you arrive home, adjusting the thermostat, unlocking the front door and opening the garage.

Digital assistants

Digital assistants "live" in your smartphone, tablet or other smart devices. They deliver answers from the internet when you speak (or type) your request into your smartphone, tablet or computer.

Amazon's Alexa, Google Assistant and Apple's Siri are digital assistants that have built-in microphones and speakers to hear you and respond to your questions. Kind of like Tom Hanks talking to "Wilson" in the movie "Cast Away," except now "Wilson" is able to answer him.

Here is a link to a Tom's Guide comparison of Alexa, Siri, and Google digital assistants: https://tinyurl.com/digi-assist

Smart home devices

Smart home devices include speakers, lighting, thermostats, home security cameras, video doorbells, smart locks, garage door openers, window shades, smart plugs, pet feeders and many more.

These devices can notify you through your phone when you forget to close the garage, lock the front door or leave the lights on. Many of these devices can be programmed or automated to do different things at specified times or detected conditions.

A good example is automating the sunshades to open at a certain time in the morning and then automatically close again after the sun goes down.

You can automatically feed your pets at a certain time, or when a smart pet feeder detects that their bowls are empty or dry: https://tinyurl.com/pet-feeders

A basic light bulb, for example, can turn on, off, or dim. Some smart mood lights also offer adjustable colors to suit your mood, such as letting you create a relaxing spa-like "chromatherapy" session in your own bathroom.

Check out this 2021 PC Magazine article on some of the best smart home devices: https://tinyurl.com/smt-devices

Smart plugs plug into a standard wall outlet, allowing you to control small "dumb" appliances like coffee makers, TVs and lights. Weather-proof smart plugs can let you control outdoor lighting, pool pumps, etc.

Smart home hubs control smart home devices

A smart home hub lets you control all of the smart devices in your home. You can program actions for different devices that trigger actions on one or more other devices.

For example, the hub can check the location of your phone, and trigger actions on other smart devices in your home when you leave or return home.

Using your location data, it can reduce your carbon footprint and save you money by lowering the thermostat when you're away, and increasing the temperature setting when you're within a certain distance from your home.

The same program can also turn on the lights, open the garage door, unlock the front door and play music when you return.

Amazon's Alexa interfaces with the Amazon Echo hub; Apple's Siri works with Apple's HomePod; and Google's Google Assistant interfaces with the Google Nest Hub. You can read more about these and other smart home hubs on the Tom's Guide website: https://tinyurl.com/smt-hubs

Privacy issues

There can be privacy issues with some smart devices. Because hubs use Wi-Fi in your home to connect to the internet, pay careful attention to privacy and security so you can use them with confidence.

Geoff Fowler, technology columnist at the Washington Post, has written several articles describing real-life invasion of privacy examples, as well as what you can do to protect your own smart home setup.

Here are two of his articles – one example related to video doorbells, and another about what Alexa may have been recording from your conversations at home: https://tinyurl.com/secur-cam-prob, https://tinyurl.com/secur-audio

Settings to improve your privacy

To protect yourself against potential invasions of privacy, carefully go through all of the default settings that Apple, Google and Amazon turn on, and most people ignore.

Adjust the settings that allow "sharing" of your data with third parties and turn off microphones and cameras when you don't specifically need them on. Also, make sure your home Wi-Fi is set up as "private" with a strong password, and not listed as "public."

A 2021 article from Consumer Reports on smart speakers identifies the privacy settings that let you mute the microphone and delete recordings collected by Amazon, Apple, and Google: https://tinyurl.com/audio-pvcy

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