

Are You OK?

Amazon files new patent to detect emotions.

BY PEGGY KEENE

Amazon has filed a new patent entitled “Voice-based determination of physical and emotional characteristics of users” to cover technology that works on the premise that “a current physical and/or emotional condition of the user may facilitate the ability to provide highly targeted audio content, such as audio advertisements or prompts, to the user.” Essentially, the invention would allow virtual assistants like Alexa to detect emotions of its users.

Virtual Assistants Will Soon Detect Emotions and Accents

Amazon says that the technology

covered by the patent is designed to not only detect emotions of users but will also be able to adapt to learn users’ emotions. Amazon believes that this technology and patent will also cover Alexa’s ability to recognize accents, which will allow the virtual assistant to predict if a specific user may want to access information or products from abroad. In the patent, Amazon specifically gives an example that the technology may be able to recognize a user as having a Chinese accent, and therefore, offer the user the option to purchase a pertinent Chinese newspaper subscription.

Amazon also states that the patent would allow Alexa to recognize abnormalities in the user’s voice, which would subsequently allow Alexa to recognize if the user is sick. For example, through comparison to previously recorded data of a user’s voice, Alexa would recognize whether the user might be sick due to health-related issues such as “sore throat, cold, thyroid issues, sleepiness, and other health conditions.” This would allow Alexa to then suggest products such as cough medicine or cold syrups to the user. The patent also states that Alexa would separate all the emotions into distinct categories so that relevant commands can be attached to the particular emotion at hand.

Privacy Concerns

While on the surface this technology may seem helpful and innocuous, it does raise more issues about what kind of data Amazon is collecting and the implications of how such data can be used. For instance, allowing Amazon to collect information on a user’s health could be alarming if the information will be shared or sold to insurance providers. If a user were to ask Alexa for information about serious medical issues that could qualify as “pre-existing conditions,” insurance

companies could potentially deny coverage to users based on their searches through Alexa.

Similarly, if Alexa collects information on a user’s “accent,” that kind of information about race and gender could also be sold or used for more nefarious reasons. While Amazon would like to use the information for more personalized and targeted advertising, third parties could use the information to make credit decisions, deny loans, or for overall racial profiling.

Will New Technology Tread on Child Privacy Regulations?

There is no current indication about whether personal assistants like Alexa will collect information on children. For instance, how would Amazon ensure that Alexa does not record the requests of children, and as such, comply with the data requirements and security provisions under the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act. Alexa currently has many “skills” that can be used by, or that are targeted to, children. If Alexa is going to record every interaction and begin to detect emotions and accents as well as analyze the health of the user, how can one ensure that Alexa does not do the same for children?

As technology advances, technology and data counsel should monitor patent filings, such as the aforementioned invention geared to detect emotions, to stay abreast of new technology that will require companies to take additional measures for handling private information when they collect such sensitive data. **TBJ**

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www.GovernmentLiaison.com
info@GovernmentLiaison.com



PEGGY KEENE

is counsel to Klemchuk LLP and focuses on internet law, particularly e-commerce, consumer digital privacy, e-sports, and video game law. She has also counseled clients in trademark portfolio management and served as in-house counsel in the telecommunications industry.