Virtual personal assistants (for example, Amazon’s Alexa, Apple’s Siri, Microsoft’s Cortana, or Google Assistant) rely on voice recognition to recognize and respond to their users’ requests. Recently, it was made public that many companies have been using human employees or subcontractors from other companies or countries to check the quality of their voice recognition software. The companies did not warn their customers that what the customers said to or near the virtual personal assistant could be recorded and listened to by total strangers. Some of the data shared included “overheard” private phone conversations, discussions of personal medical issues, and information that could let the listener identify the names and locations of the people whose voices were recorded. Do you think companies are justified in keeping recordings of their customers’ voices and using those recordings to improve their products? Does it matter if those recordings are processed by AI-based software or listened to by actual humans? Explain why or why not.

Virtual personal assistants are not limited to running on smartphones, tablets, or personal computers. Some run on smart speakers such as Amazon’s Echo or Google Home and can be found in many private homes. They are designed to be used by everyone in the home. Consequently, the voices and conversations of anyone who visits may be recorded without that person’s knowledge or explicit consent. Do you think virtual personal assistant companies should be allowed to acquire, process, and share with other companies voice recordings of people (adults and children) who are not their customers and who did not give their explicit permission? Would your answer change for products such as smart glasses that are capable of “overhearing” and recording conversations of strangers who happen to be near the person wearing the glasses in private and public places? Explain why or why not.

In a few cases, law enforcement agencies have requested that sound recordings from a certain virtual personal assistant be made available to their investigators because those recordings could contain evidence relevant to a crime investigation. Do you think such private and potentially self-incriminating recordings should be made available to government agencies? Would your answer change if AI technology was used that automatically analyzes all sound recordings in real-time and only reports the recordings to law enforcement agencies if it determines that a recording contains evidence of a crime having been committed or being planned? Explain why or why not.