

Spies and Dolls

By Reg P. Wydeven
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As I wrote in last week's article, this Christmas was the year of the drone. My son got three and loves them all. Our daughter got clothes and music – gone are the days of her playing with dolls. Lots of little girls received dolls for Christmas this year, however.

Some girls asked Santa for the My Friend Cayla doll. This doll, which retails for about \$60, houses cutting edge technology to make it very life-like. Toy maker Genesis, which manufactures the doll, describes Cayla as “a wonderful choice for a young child who needs a companion.”

Using a mobile application on a cell phone, kids can interact with Cayla. She has a Bluetooth microphone that allows her to respond to kids' questions. The only problem is that Cayla may not be the only one listening.

Consumer watchdog organizations filed a complaint at the end of last year with the Federal Trade Commission. According to the complaint, My Friend Cayla can send recordings to Nuance Communications, which is a speech-to-text software company that has contracts with military and law enforcement agencies, among other customers.

Because of Cayla's Bluetooth microphone, the groups claim the doll is susceptible to hackers, privacy violations and other similar vulnerabilities. The doll connects to its owner's wireless devices, hardware and Wi-Fi connections.

In addition to warning the FTC, the watchdog groups also contacted large retailers, asking them to pull the doll from their shelves. Josh Golin, executive director of Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, wrote a letter to Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos. The letter read, in part, “My Friend Cayla poses significant security risks that could place children in physical danger.” Golin also alleged that “Genesis fails to require basic authentication mechanisms to prevent unauthorized Bluetooth connections between the doll and a smartphone or tablet.”

Finally, Golin claims that, “As a result, a stranger or potential predator within a 50-foot range can easily establish a Bluetooth connection with the doll, eavesdrop on the child, and even converse with the child through the doll.” Not good.

The Center for Digital Democracy and the Electronic Privacy Information Center sent similar letters to Walmart, Target and Toys 'R' Us. In response, Toys 'R' Us stopped selling the doll at its stores or through its website.

Claire Gartland, director of the Consumer Privacy Project at the Electronic Privacy Information Center fears that dolls like Cayla “normalize surveillance to young children,” teaching them that it's not unusual to have a trusted toy recording their conversations and relaying their words to corporations.

And there are not only concerns in the U.S. Retailers in Europe, such as Jollyroom and Amazon Spain, have also pulled My Friend Cayla and i-Que, a similar toy made by Genesis that is a robot. Other retailers, including Top-Toy, are offering refunds for consumers who purchased the toys.

The watchdog groups assert that, “When companies collect personal information from children, they incur serious legal obligations to protect children's privacy.”

Thankfully the plush Chewbacca I received for Christmas this year contains no electronics. Of course, companies are likely to be bored listening to me watch TV.

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