**Privacy breached?**

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August 01, 2023

[Opinions](https://www.nation.com.pk/opinions), [Columns](https://www.nation.com.pk/columns)

Since world order is switching over from a unipolar to a multipolar, the United States—known to be dictating terms to world, championing its own human right standards and protecting the sanctity of consumer privacy in the digital arena—is getting a taste of its own medicine.
Apple, the manufacturer of the iPhone, is in a tight spot for allegedly flouting the customers’ due rights with impunity. This happened in the backdrop of France calling into question Apple’s advertisement malpractices.
Recently, the White House grilled Chinese mobile companies and apps for allegedly risking US national security. The Biden administration blamed TikTok especially for sharing consumers’ personal data with the Chinese government. Believed to be sign of retribution, the company is now under question by France.
The French competition watchdog has formally objected to Apple’s practices, accusing the iPhone manufacturer of exploiting its leading market position to dictate terms concerning the use of personal data for promotional purposes.
The competition authority, or AdlC, has confirmed that it had initiated an investigation into Apple’s advertising data practices, with the tech giant’s App Tracking Transparency (ATT) privacy policy program the focus of scrutiny. The agency cited concerns that the company could have infringed rules linked to the use of iPhone user data for advertising purposes.
In 2020, four French advertising groups lodged a grievance against Apple regarding the implementation of its ATT program, which allows users some control over the ability of apps to track and relay data, and which could be harnessed by advertisers for personalised marketing, reported Reuters news agency.
The advertisers contended that Apple’s changes did not align with the European Union privacy regulations, a claim that Apple refutes. The ATT mandates developers to seek user consent if they intend to “track” user activities across different apps, noted the Financial Times newspaper. This tracking is a prevalent method for constructing a user’s digital profile and targeting them with customised advertisements, it said.
Apple denied this is the case, and in a statement insisted it holds its advertising business ‘to a higher standard of privacy than it requires of any other developer. “App Tracking Transparency gives users more control by requiring all apps to ask permission before tracking them. Apple, like all developers, is required to comply with ATT. Apple’s apps do not show an ATT prompt because they do not track, meaning they do not link user or device data with user or device data collected from other companies’ apps, websites, or offline properties for targeted advertising or advertising measurement purposes, nor do they share user or device data with data brokers.”
Market research organisation Evercore ISI projects that the revenue from iPhone’s ads will surge from $5 billion in 2022 to $30 billion by 2026, reported the FT, noting Apple itself has described its ads business as ‘incredibly fast-growing’.
“We have previously received strong support from regulators and privacy advocates” on the ATT policy’s goal, Apple said. “We will continue to engage with the (French authorities) constructively to ensure users remain in control of their data.”
The Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) is an organisation that develops standards to be used across the industry to control and regulate online advertising. It has Google, Meta, Adobe, and many other companies as members. This week, IAB CEO David Cohen had a few things to say about Apple’s approach to iPhone policy and privacy.
Speaking at IAB’s annual leadership meeting, Cohen accused Apple of “attacking” the ad industry from the inside, saying Apple represents “cynicism and hypocrisy.” Cohen said “while there are no shortage of extremists attacking our industry from the outside, there are some attacking it from the inside out. Most notably, Apple exemplifies the cynicism and hypocrisy that underpins the prevailing extremist view.”
Cohen explains that while Apple requires apps to ask users for permission before tracking them across apps and websites owned by other companies, the company can track its own users without accountability. Cohen refers to a feature called App Tracking Transparency (ATT), launched in April 2021, that forces apps to ask users for explicit consent before tracking them. “It can’t be that ‘personalisation’ in the Apple ecosystem equals ‘tracking’ outside of it,” Cohen said. “That’s not really a fair fight.”
Apple requires third-party apps to ask users for permission before tracking them, but the company’s stock apps do not since they don’t track users, according to Apple’s senior vice president of software engineering Craig Federighi. In an interview with the Wall Street Journal in April 2021 about ATT, Federighi explained that no Apple app would have the ATT pop-up since “there’s no Apple app or service that tracks users.” Federighi added that if Apple launched an app or service that tracked users, it would comply with its own App Store policy.
Apple is currently facing a class action lawsuit that alleges it records users’ mobile activity without their consent, despite Apple’s privacy assurances. The lawsuit accuses Apple of providing “utterly false” assurances that iPhone users are in control of their data. “Apple records, tracks, collects and monetises analytics data—including browsing history and activity information—regardless of what safeguards or ‘privacy settings’ consumers undertake to protect their privacy,” the lawsuit reads.