Apple’s Privacy Policy: How “Private” is it?

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Ever since the boom of smartphones around a decade ago, no topic has caused more controversy in the technological world than privacy. “Privacy” itself can have a broad scope of meanings, ranging from informational privacy to surveillance privacy, and even categories within those such as privacy from a company and privacy from the outside world. The focus of this research will be on the privacy of information sent to and from a company, what they claim they do with that information, versus what they truly do with it. A more recent episode concerning Apple will be analyzed. Both sides will be looked at, sides arguing both for and against the way information was used, whether it is right or not, and what should be done about it, if anything.

Around three months ago, information was leaked to the public about some concerning ways Apple was using data it receives from Siri, Apple’s digital assistant, discussed in an article by Alex Hern for “The Guardian”. Apple is well known for boasting their emphasis on privacy. However, even though this isn’t disclosed in their privacy policy, Apple was called out in this article for passing along random Siri recordings to various contractors, who “are tasked with grading the responses on a variety of factors” (Hern, 2019, p. 1). According to Apple, they use data from Siri to help Siri learn, understand, and respond to requests better, but they say nothing about this “learning” being done by human means. Now, that alone may not be a concern to most. After all, AI on a level this small needs some human intervention anyway. However, the more concerning thing is the type of recordings that were revealed to be heard, recordings often caused by Siri accidentally being activated. An anonymous “whistleblower” told The Guardian that numerous instances of “private discussions between doctors and patients, business deals, seemingly criminal dealings, sexual encounters…” (Hern, 2019, p. 2) are just some of the concerning recordings that Apple is sending to these firms. There is currently no information about if or how this information is encrypted, how secure these firms are, and so on, largely because Apple doesn’t so much as mention any of this in any of its policies.

Now, all of this could be taken with a grain of salt, especially when the article was first published. Additionally, due to the anonymity of the mentioned “whistleblower” of one of the firms, it could have been taken as a rumor and nothing more than that. And it might have been, if Apple didn’t publish an apology statement only a month later. In a follow-up article by the same author, Hern outlined the statement by Apple and the actions they took after the claim. A much shorter article than the first, Hern starts off with the statement Apple gave to The Guardian, which included that they have presently ceased the grading program for Siri that caused so much concern. According to the statement, Apple also mentioned that they would continue the program in the fall “when software updates are released to our users” (Hern, 2019, p. 1). With these “software updates”, Apple has disabled recordings being sent by default, something that users can opt into, and instead sends the results’ transcripts by default, text rather than audio recordings. This will likely cause accidental information pickups to happen much less often, as digital assistants often don’t transcript words that aren’t spoken directly to it or out of range. In fact, it almost seems like that’s a programmed feature of assistants to prevent accidental activations from being turned into a search query. This will especially stop non-verbal recordings from being sent as well, such as the accidental sexual activity that was being recorded.

The biggest difference between Apple and other companies, such as Google and Amazon, is those two companies have always had an option to opt out of recordings being sent to them, or just disabled by default in the first place. Not only did Apple not provide this option to its users, but it kept the whole situation hidden entirely, not mentioning anything to its users that their recordings were being sent to contractors without their consent, including things recorded on accident. This should be a concern to people, especially because of the size of Apple’s industry, the influence they have on the technological world, and the reputation of privacy they’ve upheld thus far, now being shot down a bit by this situation. The more that situations like this get leaked, the bigger the concern about modern technology gets.

What ethical implications does this have? What does this do to the purpose of a privacy policy, if a company like Apple has been having the mindset of “it’s not illegal unless you get caught”? What other things could Apple or another company be getting away with in the same manner?

People have done their best to customize what data gets sent to and from a company’s database, but that only goes so far. It seems that this will continue to be a debate and concern, rightfully so, for as long as the current technological world is relevant. Apple took the best stand they could, given the situation they were in, but that won’t stop other companies from falling into similar issues, or stop people from worrying about their privacy. It’s a constant battle in the information age, where not only is helpful knowledge available and accessible, but also personal information being collected by companies that the user has no true, definitive control over the use of.

Should companies have permission to collect personal information about users? That’s a debate that is up in the air. There are many quite valid arguments for and against that, and much of it is very situational. Should companies do things with said information without the user’s knowledge or consent? Even if the company’s intentions are completely pure and true to what they claim, every human has the right to privacy, and part of that is consent for the use of what is theirs, and that includes personal information about oneself. In the justice and fairness to the consumer, said consumer should be given any and all rights to give or refuse permission to a company that may want to use his or her personal information for whatever purpose they might want it, even if this looks like not purchasing a device or service. Use of personal information needs to be outlined in a company’s privacy policy in full, and companies need to be transparent about what they are doing with people’s information. Logically, this is the best way for a company to gain the trust and approval of various consumers.

Shift this whole scenario to another perspective. What if Apple *did* disclose what they were using users’ information the way they were? What if sending recordings to the firms *was* in their privacy policy? Things likely would not have escalated so much, if at all. Many users who have had a firm trust in Apple before may have looked at that and not have given it second thought; and if legal issues did arise, Apple could point right back to their privacy policy, which most users fail to read, making the whole “unethical accusation” a fault of the consumer.

All unethical situations are avoidable. That doesn’t mean everything can turn out perfectly, but the right choices can always be made. The biggest problem comes when money, productivity, and convenience are prioritized above ethical thinking. It’s the whole reason informational privacy is such a big deal in the first place. Most large companies would risk losing what to them is an expendable amount of money for the sake of making more. Changing the current state of this issue is a long, seemingly impossible journey, but the best form of progress to see any change is going to be consumers taking more care to make sure they know what they’re sharing, and for companies to be more transparent about what they are truly doing with information. Trust in the economical world is just as important as in our personal lives, and ethical decisions are going to be what strengthens that.

References

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