

Apple admits to secretly giving governments push notification data

Ashley Belanger : 3-3 minutes : 12/6/2023

Governments have been secretly tracking the app activity of an unknown number of people using Apple and Google smartphones, US Senator Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) revealed today.

In a [letter](#) demanding that the Department of Justice update or repeal policies prohibiting companies from informing the public about these covert government requests, Wyden warned that "Apple and Google are in a unique position to facilitate government surveillance of how users are using particular apps."

Push notifications are used to provide a wide variety of alerts to app users. A friendly ding or text alert on the home screen notifies users about new text messages, emails, social media comments, news updates, packages delivered, gameplay nudges—basically any app activity where notifications have been enabled could be tracked by governments, Wyden said.

According to Wyden, many app users do not realize that these instant alerts "aren't sent directly from the app provider to users' smartphones" but instead "pass through a kind of digital post office run by the phone's operating system provider" to "ensure timely and efficient delivery of notifications."

Data transmitted to Google and Apple includes metadata "detailing which app received a notification and when, as well as the phone and associated Apple or Google account to which that notification was intended to be delivered," Wyden wrote. Sometimes data shared may include "unencrypted content, which could range from backend directives for the app to the actual text displayed to a user in an app notification," Wyden warned.

"As with all of the other information these companies store for or about their users, because Apple and Google deliver push notification data, they can be secretly compelled by governments to hand over this information," Wyden wrote.

Wyden said his office spent the past year investigating a "tip" received in spring 2022 claiming that "government agencies in foreign countries were demanding smartphone 'push' notification records from Google and Apple."

After contacting the companies, Wyden concluded that "Apple and Google should be permitted to be transparent about the legal demands they receive, particularly from foreign governments, just as the companies regularly notify users about other types of government demands for data."