

# Apple CEO escalates battle with Facebook over online privacy

January 28 2021, by Michael Liedtke

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In this Jan. 3, 2019, file photo, a man leaves an Apple store in Beijing. Apple says it will roll out a new privacy control in spring 2021 to prevent iPhone apps from secretly shadowing people. (AP Photo/Andy Wong, File)

Apple CEO Tim Cook fired off a series of thinly veiled shots at

Facebook and other social media companies Thursday, escalating an online privacy battle pitting the iPhone maker against digital services that depend on tracking people to help sell ads.

"Too many are still asking the question 'how much can we get away with?' when we should be asking 'what are the consequences?'" Cook said. "What are the consequences of not just tolerating but rewarding content that undermines public trust in life-saving vaccinations? What are the consequences of seeing thousands of users join extremist groups and then perpetuating an algorithm that recommends more?"

Speaking at a virtually held International Conference on Computers, Privacy & Data Protection, Cook said it's "time to stop pretending that this approach doesn't come with a cost—of polarization, lost trust and yes, of violence."

Cook never specifically named Facebook or any other company. But his remarks left little doubt that his missives were aimed at the social media sites that have been criticized for enabling conspiracy theories, hate speech and political misinformation that culminated in the Jan. 6 insurrection that overtook the U.S. Capitol while Congress met to confirm the election of President Joe Biden.

"A social dilemma cannot be allowed to become a social catastrophe," Cook added, referring to a Netflix documentary about technology's—and especially social media's—corrosive effects on society. That film took square aim at Facebook and how its algorithms manipulate its nearly 3 billion users to get them to look at the ads that generate most of its revenue.

Cook's broadside came as Apple prepares to roll out a new privacy control in the early spring to prevent iPhone apps from secretly shadowing people. That puts the feature on course to come out after a

more than six-month delay aimed at placating Facebook and other digital services that depend on such data surveillance to help sell ads.

Although Apple didn't provide a specific date, the general timetable disclosed Thursday means the long-awaited safeguard known as [App Tracking Transparency](#) will be part of an iPhone software update likely to arrive in late March or some point in April.

After delaying the planned September introduction of the safeguard amid a Facebook-led outcry, Apple had previously said it would come out early this year. Apple released the latest schedule update as part of Data Privacy Day.

Apple has been holding off to give Facebook and other app makers more time to adjust to a feature that will require iPhone users to give their explicit consent to being tracked. Analysts expect a significant number of users to deny that permission once it requires their assent. Currently, iPhone users are frequently tracked by apps they install unless they take the extra step of going into iPhone settings to prevent it.

"Technology does not need vast troves of personal data, stitched together across dozens of websites and apps, in order to succeed," Cook said. "Advertising existed and thrived for decades without it."

As a supplement to Cook's remarks, Apple also released [an 11-page report](#) to illustrate how much apps can learn about their users in daily life.

Facebook stepped up its attacks on Apple's new privacy control last month in a series of full-page ads in The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and other national newspapers. That campaign suggested some free digital services will be hobbled if they can't compile personal information to customize ads. On Wednesday, CEO Mark Zuckerberg

questioned Apple's motives for the changes, saying the iPhone maker "has every incentive" to use its own mobile platform to interfere with rivals to its own messaging app.

"Apple may say that they are doing this to help people, but the moves clearly track their competitive interests," Zuckerberg said.

Google, which also relies on personal data to power the internet's biggest ad network, hasn't joined Facebook in its criticism of Apple's forthcoming controls on tracking. Google profits from being the default search engine on the iPhone, a prized position for which it pays Apple an estimated \$9 billion to \$12 billion annually.

But Google [warned in a Wednesday blog post](#) that Apple's new controls will have a significant impact on the iPhone ad revenue of other apps in its digital network. Google said a "handful" of its own iPhone apps will be affected by the new requirement, but plans to make changes to them so they won't be affected by Apple's new controls. It did not identify which apps.

"We remain committed to preserving a vibrant and open app ecosystem where people can access a broad range of ad-supported content with confidence that their privacy and choices are respected," wrote Christophe Combette, group product manager for Google Ads.

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Citation: Apple CEO escalates battle with Facebook over online privacy (2021, January 28) retrieved 26 April 2024 from

<https://techxplore.com/news/2021-01-apple-ceo-lambasts-tech-rivals.html>

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