Apple defends child protection features over privacy concerns

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US tech giant Apple announced new child protection features on August 5 that sparked concerns over privacy.

Apple on Friday defended new child protection features that would check images uploaded to its cloud storage and on its messaging

platform, rejecting concerns the updates pose threats to privacy.

"We can see that it's been widely misunderstood," the US tech giant's software chief Craig Federighi said of the update rollout in an interview with the Wall Street Journal published Friday.

Last week, Apple unveiled two features to debut on iPads and iPhones in the United States.

One can identify child sexual abuse images uploaded to its iCloud storage, while the other uses machine learning to recognize and warn children and their parents when receiving or sending sexually explicit photos on Apple's texting app, Messages, the company said in the statement.

Federighi said the new tools do not make Apple's systems and devices less secure or confidential.

"We wanted to be able to spot such photos in the cloud without looking at people's photos," he said, adding Apple wanted to "offer this kind of capability... in a way that is much, much more private than anything that's been done in this area before."

The company has also posted detailed explanations of the new features, saying in a technical paper that the technology, developed by cryptographic experts, "is secure, and is expressly designed to preserve user privacy."

The company said it will have limited access to any violating images, which would be flagged to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, a nonprofit organization.

In a briefing on Friday, Apple explained it would rely on trusted groups

in multiple countries to determine what images to look out for to make sure searches weren't being manipulated for other purposes.

It underscored that only images uploaded to iCloud are checked, with the system scanning for a digital version of a fingerprint that matches known child sex abuse images without seeing pictures.

Encryption and privacy specialists have said the tool could be exploited for other purposes, potentially opening a door to mass surveillance.

Others voiced concern the move could be a first step toward weakening encryption and opening "backdoors" that could be exploited by hackers or governments.

"We have faced demands to build and deploy government-mandated changes that degrade the privacy of users before, and have steadfastly refused those demands," Apple said in a post.

"We will continue to refuse them in the future."

Apple was adamant it would not accede to any government's request to scan for anything other than images showing child sexual abuse.

An online letter calling on Apple not to implement the features has been signed by more than 7,700 people, including former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden, who leaked information revealing the US government's mass surveillance program.

"Apple's current path threatens to undermine decades of work by technologists, academics and policy advocates towards strong privacy-preserving measures being the norm across a majority of consumer electronic devices and use cases," read the plea posted at appleprivacyletter.com.

"We ask that Apple reconsider its technology rollout, lest it undo that important work."

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