

Apple, defying the times, stays quiet on AI

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Apple CEO Tim Cook speaks during Apple's Worldwide Developers Conference in Cupertino, California, on June 5, 2023.

Resisting the hype, Apple defied most predictions this week and made no mention of artificial intelligence when it unveiled its latest slate of new products, including its Vision Pro mixed reality headset.

Generative AI has become the tech world's biggest buzzword ever since Microsoft-backed OpenAI released ChatGPT late last year, revealing the capabilities of the emerging technology.

ChatGPT opened the world's eyes to the idea that computers can churn out complex, human-level content using simple prompts, giving amateurs the talents of tech geeks, artists or speechwriters.

Apple has laid low as Microsoft and Google raced out announcements on how generative AI will revolutionize its products, from online search to word processing and retouching images.

During the recent earnings season, tech CEOs peppered mentions of AI into their every phrase, eager to reassure investors that they wouldn't miss Silicon Valley's next big chapter.

Apple has chosen to be much more discreet and, in its closely watched keynote address to the World Developers conference in California, never once mentioned AI specifically.

"Apple ghosts the generative AI revolution," said a headline in Wired Magazine after the event.

'Not necessarily AI?'

Arguments vary on why Apple has chosen a more subtle approach.

For one, Apple follows other critics who have long been wary of the catchall "AI" term believing that it is too vague and unhelpfully evokes dystopian nightmares of killer robots and human subjugation to machines.

For this reason, some companies—including TikTok or Facebook's

Meta—roll out AI innovations, but without necessarily touting them as such.

"We do integrate it into our products [but] people don't necessarily think about it as AI," Apple CEO Tim Cook told ABC News this week.

Indeed, AI was actually very much part of Apple's annual jamboree on Monday, but it required a level of technical know-how to notice.

In one instance, Apple's head of software said "on-device machine learning" would enhance autocorrect for iPhone messaging when he could have just as well said AI.

Apple's autocorrect innovation drew giggles with the promise of iPhones no longer correcting common expletives.

"In those moments where you just want to type a 'ducking' word, well, the keyboard will learn it, too," said Craig Federighi.

Autocorrect will also learn from your [writing style](#), helping it guide suggestions, using AI technology similar to what powers ChatGPT.

In another example, a new iPhone app called Journal, an interactive diary, would use "on-device machine learning... to inspire your writing," Apple said, again not referring to AI when other companies would have.

But AI will also play a major role in the Vision Pro headset when it is released next year, helping, for example, generate a user's digital persona for video-conferencing.

'Not much effort'

For some analysts, the non-mention of AI is an acknowledgement by

Apple that it lost ground against rivals.

"They haven't put much effort into it," independent tech analyst Rob Enderle told AFP.

"I think they just kind of felt that AI was off into the future and it wasn't anything surprising," he added.

The glitchy performance of Apple's chatbot Siri, which was launched a decade ago, has also fed the feeling that the smartphone giant doesn't get AI.

"I think most people would agree that Apple lost its edge with Siri. That's probably the most obvious way they fell behind," said Insider Intelligence principal analyst Yory Wurmser.

But Wurmser also insisted that Apple is primarily a device company and that AI, which is software, will always be "the means rather than the ends for a great user experience" on its premium devices.

In this vein, for analyst Dan Ives of Wedbush Securities, the release of Apple's Vision Pro headset was in itself an AI play, even if it wasn't explicitly spelled out that way.

"We continue to strongly believe this is the first step in a broader strategy for Apple to build out a generative AI driven app ecosystem" on the Vision Pro, he said.

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