Apple exec dismisses Google CEO’s criticism over turning privacy into a ‘luxury good’



Apple’s software chief, Craig Federighi, says he doesn’t “buy into” the criticism that Apple is turning privacy into a luxury good, an accusation that was indirectly leveled at the company by Google CEO Sundar Pichai.

In an interview with *The Independent*, Federighi dismissed “the luxury good dig,” just a couple weeks after Pichai wrote an op-ed in *The New York Times* saying that “privacy cannot be a luxury good offered only to people who can afford to buy premium products and services.” While Pichai didn’t name Apple, which has recently advertised the privacy benefits of its $999 phone, there’s no mistaking which company he’s referring to.

Federighi says minimizing data collection means there’s less of a risk in China

Apple wants to sell products to “everyone we possibly could,” Federighi said, adding that Apple’s products are “certainly

not just a luxury.” The argument stems over the difference in business models between the two companies: Apple sells generally high-priced hardware directly to customers, so it doesn’t need to collect much data on them; while Google offers a multitude of free services to users, primarily profiting off of ads displayed on those services that are often targeted based on user data. Pichai argued that it’s important to provide privacy-protective services that everyone has access to.

Federighi said it’s “gratifying” to see other companies discussing privacy, but that it’ll take more than “a couple of months and a couple of press releases” to change these companies’ business practices, which rely on data collection. Federighi didn’t name Google specifically, but likewise, it’s pretty clear which company he’s referring to.

In the interview, Federighi also addressed two other criticisms of Apple’s privacy stance: that it shouldn’t be storing Chinese’ users iCloud data in China, where the country could spy on it; and that its choice not to collect much user data has made it fall behind when it comes to develop AI features, like Siri.

On China, Federighi suggests that storing data within the country isn’t as big of a risk for Apple as it would be for other companies, because of “all of our data minimization techniques.” Between encrypting data and collecting a small amount of data in the first place, Federighi says there’s not much to access on its Chinese iCloud servers, and that anyone who does gain access wouldn’t be able to do much with that information.

Federighi also says he sees the choice between collecting data and building powerful new AI features as a “false trade off.” Building these features without collecting additional user data, “sometimes that’s extra work,” he says. “But that’s worth it.”

Apple does that in a handful of ways, according to the report. That includes buying a catalog of public photos it can use to train algorithms on, as well as analyzing publicly available voice data — like podcasts — instead of using voice recordings from users. Apple has also revealed in the past that it uses differential privacy techniques to anonymize user data and learn from the data in aggregate.

The privacy battle between these two companies is unlikely to slow down. Because Apple's business model doesn't involve selling ads, privacy is a key area that Apple can use to make its products stand out, which incentivizes the company to keep volleying back at Google.

Google, meanwhile, understands that the cultural tide is turning against massive data collection, largely thanks to Facebook's constant scandals, and it's been making small changes to limit some of those concerns. Just this month, that's included a new easy-to-read privacy policy for Nest devices, limits to ad tracking in Chrome, and Incognito modes for more apps.

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