Somehow, Android's messaging mess is about to get even worse

I am so discombobulated by yesterday's news that the four major US carriers are banding together to make a whole other company to replace SMS with RCS and ship their own app that I barely know where to begin.

I guess at the beginning.

One of the biggest botched opportunities in all of Silicon Valley in the past few years is Google's repeated, persistent, tragic-on-a-Greek-scale failure to get its messaging products right. Six (six!) years ago I detailed Google's massive effort to unify everything under Hangouts. Every year since then has been either a fiasco, catastrophe, retrenchment, or an outright retreat.

After five years of that, Google threw in the towel and put the carriers in charge of text messaging on Android. It went all in on RCS Chat in April 2018, an SMS replacement that could be owned and operated by the mobile carriers.

It turns out that giving over control of your entire messaging product strategy to the companies that are focused on mergers, 5G, and TV streaming apps was a bad idea. Who could have guessed?

Well, everybody. But there was a tiny chance that Google could use its longstanding partnerships and the significant leverage of making the most dominant phone OS on the planet to get everybody in line. Google offered up technical assistance and

more to carriers, it pleaded and cajoled. Very little worked.

Which is why in June of this year Google pulled the band aid off the seeping wound of carrier RCS adoption. It announced that in two countries — the UK and France — it would just offer RCS services directly without waiting for carriers to figure it out.

Then, silence.

Until yesterday, when Verizon, AT&T, T-Mobile, and Sprint announced the "Cross-Carrier Messaging Initiative" (CCMI). It's a joint venture, a whole other company that will offer business chat services to businesses and a new default texting app to Android users in 2020. It may or may not be a direct response to Google's implied threat that it would just take over texting for all Android phones in the US because nobody else was getting the job done — but the timing sure seems notable.

Then, endless screaming?

We don't know yet, but we do know that apps that come directly from carriers — even ones for core services — are usually terrible. Witness: Verizon's VZNavigator, Verizon Message+, AT&T Navigator, AT&T messages. There's no word on whether or not RCS will be end-to-end encrypted, only a vague repetition of the word "privacy."

And for the CCMI to even get to a place where it's offering an app that isn't riddled with ways for these carriers to feed the Angry God of Average Revenue Per User, it will need to simply succeed as a joint venture amongst the big carriers. Ask SoftCard (née Isis) how successful it was as a mobile payments competitor to Google and Apple Pay. You can't ask because it's gone. A more recent attempt: Zenkey, a password replacement app that is the right idea from the wrong companies.

Most telling in all of this: Google was completely cut out of the announcement, to the point where it took the company several hours to cobble together a statement in response to the initiative. Google, which has spent the past few years aggressively lobbying for RCS.

The CCMI tells me that it plans to work with Google and others to ensure that their apps are compatible with its platform. It tells me that its text messages will be fully standards "based" and compatible with RCS around the world.

At any time in the past five years, Google could have leveraged Android's 80-plus-percent market share and told carriers that it was launching a default messaging service that works like iMessage, falling back to SMS only when necessary. It's not in Google's nature to push partners around (though it does make exceptions). For reasons that probably seemed reasonable every time, when it came to messaging Google always blinked.

All that blinking and now the opportunity to simply fix Android's messaging mess by fiat might have passed. By handing control of Android messaging over to the carriers, Google wasn't just blinking — it was blinkered. Now the company has to scramble to make sure this entirely foreseeable outcome doesn't end up wrecking the default texting experience on every Android phone sold in America.

If Verizon, AT&T, T-Mobile, and Sprint don't do a radically better job than they have in the past at offering good apps and good services, Android users will be stuck with something awful. If that happens, all Google will have really accomplished with its messaging machinations is to convince Americans that the only way to actually solve the messaging mess on Android is to buy an iPhone.

More from The Verge

Overnight, after I put this newsletter (and myself) to bed but before it lands in your inboxes in the morning, I will have published a couple of stories. Our **Pixelbook Go review** and an important story about **why 10 percent of all Google Search results are changing.** Check ‘em out, also check out the below:

+ Apple TV app launches on Amazon Fire TV devices

M.G. Siegler: A glass of hell water in ice?

+ Motorola’s Moto G8 Plus announced with three cameras and a big battery

I have to tell you, it is VERY difficult for me to square the idea of a phone company that cranks out iterative, fine, but forgettable phones like this one with the idea of phone company that’s about to bring back the RAZR as an innovative, cool phone with a folding display.

+ Ford will unveil its Mustang-inspired electric SUV on November 17th

SUVs have a reputation for being gas hogs with terrible turning radiuses, overweight chassis, and terrible blind spots. Aren’t they all already inspired by the Mustang?

+ Google will replace Home devices bricked due to latest firmware update

Has Fall 2019 been the worst launch season ever for software quality? Yes, yes it absolutely has.

+ RED cancels Hydrogen phone project as founder Jim Jannard retires

It’s honestly a bummer that Jim Jannard’s last days running the company were about this silly, bad phone and silly, bad promises to make a second version. True story: eight years ago

I missed most of the launch party for The Verge because I was sitting in a damp, cold, snowy alley trying to get live details on the then new RED Scarlet X 4K camera. I will choose to remember Jim Jannard for those products, not for the Hydrogen phone fiasco.

https://www.theverge.com/2019/10/25/20931699/android-messaging-ccmi-rcs-mess-isis-google-fiascotastrophe