

Why does my phone make it so hard to turn off Bluetooth?

Lately, my phone really wants me to turn on Bluetooth. I only own one Bluetooth gadget (a UE Boom 2 I keep around my apartment) and I typically turn the antenna off when I'm not actively using it, but lately it's been popping back on when I'm not looking. It's a deliberate move by Apple: under iOS 11, turning Bluetooth off from the control center simply puts Bluetooth on time out until the next morning instead of disabling it permanently. Even when it's off, the antenna stays on, looking for new devices. You can turn it all the way off by digging into the settings menu, but as soon as you turn it on for any reason, the cycle starts again. The assumption is that, between Apple's AirPods, the Pencil, and other wireless gadgets, the average person uses Bluetooth enough that a permanent off switch just doesn't make sense.

That logic might hold true for a lot of Apple users, but it's not how Bluetooth works for me. After enough creepy tracking stories, I think of Bluetooth more as a liability than a feature. Bluetooth beacons are everywhere, and as long as your antenna is live, there's a good chance one of your apps is using them to pin down your location. The signal's short range makes it ideal for identifying someone's location, which can be used to target ads or even be presented as evidence by police. This is true for every kind of connectivity to some extent, from Wi-Fi down to the cell tower itself. But I'm willing to keep Wi-Fi on because I *need* Wi-Fi. I don't need Bluetooth (at least not yet), and as long as I'm not actively using it, I'd rather leave it off. Thanks to a string of sneaky design decisions, that's getting harder and harder to arrange.

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Before you blame Apple, I should say that Android is just as bad. Even after you turn off Bluetooth connections, most updated Android phones will keep your Bluetooth antenna live to collect location data. To turn it off on a Google Pixel running the latest version of Android, you have to dig five levels deep: in Settings > Security & Location > scroll to Privacy > Location > Scanning. I suspect most Android users have no idea the setting even exists. If any Android users were turning off Bluetooth for privacy reasons, they may have been sharing data without even knowing.

This data thirst isn't just about greed. Maps and ride-sharing services need to be able to pin down your location, and there's a real consumer benefit to making that data more accurate and consistent. But it's also valuable information, particularly for companies like Google that already have an ad network to feed it into. Turning on Bluetooth is a way of sucking up more data and making more money – something companies surely knew when they decided to focus on location-dependent services and Bluetooth-dependent hardware.

In some ways, this is the same deal web services have offered from the beginning: a free product, paid for with some quiet data collection. By now, we barely think about it. But as Bluetooth defaults get more aggressive, that deal is getting worse and most users don't even realize it's happening. With so much data pouring through so many avenues, surely an accessible off switch isn't too much to ask.

<https://www.theverge.com/2018/2/25/17041440/bluetooth-location-tracking-iphone-android-privacy>