

At WWDC 2019, Apple touts Sign In as convenient without privacy hit

Bud Tribble, vice president of Apple's software technology business, says even free services need to respect privacy, a shot at Google and Facebook.

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Apple CEO Tim Cook (left) consults with Chief Design Officer Jony Ive at WWDC 2019.

With its Sign In with Apple -- an alternative to single sign-on services offered by rivals Facebook and Google, unveiled at the company's WWDC keynote -- Apple says it's offering a new way to vouch for your identity with your favorite apps or services.

But it's more than that. Sign In is also a direct challenge to the idea you need to "pay a heavy privacy price" for the convenience of a sign-on service, says Guy "Bud" Tribble, vice president of software technology at Apple. While its rivals track you so they can keep tabs on your online activities and collect personal info, Apple and CEO Tim Cook have said that privacy is a "fundamental human right."

"It's not rocket science to say, 'Hey wouldn't that be great to have that without the tracking part of it,'" Tribble said in an interview after the new service was unveiled to applause at Apple's Worldwide Developers Conference on Monday. "Our whole point of view is giving more control to the user over things like their data."

As part of the sign-in service, Apple will also generate a random email linked to third-party apps if you don't want to give up your own email. That way app developers can stay in touch without actually capturing your address. Sign In will work on Macs, the Apple Watch and iOS, the mobile operating system that powers the iPhone and iPad.

It's also part of Apple's ongoing plan to make privacy one of its key selling points in direct contrast to its rivals, which use sign-on services to help craft a profile of users so they can better serve lucrative, targeted ads as part of what some are calling surveillance capitalism. Since Apple generates its revenue from the sale of devices and services, and not ads, it isn't as interested in your information.

That's put a spotlight on Facebook and Google, which do make the majority of their money on personalized ads. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg and Google CEO Sundar Pichai have stressed during their own developer conferences in the last few months that they too care about your data and are working on building more privacy protections into their products.

"We're not really taking a shot at anybody," Cook said in an interview with CBS News' Norah O'Donnell. "We focus on the user. And the user wants the ability to go across numerous properties on the web without being under surveillance...I actually think it's a very reasonable request for people to make."

Google declined to comment on Apple's sign-in feature, while Facebook didn't comment.

A natural extension

Sign In came about partly because some of Apple's own employees started questioning these services and whether it could do better. "Some of us have probably used social media single-sign on ourselves," Tribble said with a chuckle.

Apple got its start by giving people more control over their computing, said Tribble, a member of the original Macintosh design team. So giving people more control over their data is a natural extension, he added.



Back then, that meant making things simpler and easier to understand. With privacy, he said, it's no different.

While Apple wouldn't say how many developers it expects to embrace Sign In, its policy states that any developer offering Facebook and Google sign-ins need to adopt Apple's as well.

Another WWDC announcement, an update to iOS 13 that will allow you to only let an app track your

location once, is a way of subtly showing users how their location data might be used, Tribble said. While the goal is to design user interfaces and experiences that ask your permission each time an app asks for personal information and spell out how that data is being used, he acknowledged, "our job is never done."

But it starts with companies acknowledging that it's their job to help consumers understand what's going on with their data. Tribble believes Apple has led in this area.

"Apple has done more than most in pushing our industry forward and being an example of how to do that," he said.

Taking privacy seriously

Apple reviews 100,000 apps a week, and Tribble said the company rejects 40 percent of those apps -- many for privacy reasons. The company has made it a priority to stamp out apps that try to fool users, or seek out permissions on your phone they have no right to ask for.

That's not to say there isn't an opportunity to do business with Apple. He talked about a technique called "privacy-protected ad-click attribution," or a way for Apple's Safari browser to track what ads you've clicked but mask your specific details as it sends the information to advertisers.

It's a middle ground between browsers that let trackers run loose and more privacy-focused options like the Brave browser. It's also an example of the kind of innovation that leads to protecting your data even if a service is free, Tribble said.

"Privacy should be available in every device and in every service," Tribble said, in response to an editorial by Google CEO Sundar Pichai saying that "privacy shouldn't be a luxury good," a knock on Apple's high prices for its iPhones, iPads and Macs.

Tribble, meanwhile, supports privacy regulation and believes the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation, which just passed its first year on the books, is a good model. He said he hopes US regulators learn from it, noting that GDPR "got a lot of things right."

Getting secure in the Home(kit)

Apple's HomeKit Secure Video emerged as a reaction to the explosion of smart home cameras in the market, Tribble said.

Under Apple's system, the video would go through a HomeKit-enabled device, which handles the object detection and analysis, and then encrypts the video and sends it to Apple's servers. Unlike other smart home video companies, Apple has no way to see the video. The user can access the video with a unique key to decrypt the footage, he said.



Craig Federighi, head of software for Apple, talks about HomeKit Secure Video.

James Martin/CNET

