

Q-and-A: Smartphone location tracking

April 24 2011, By JORDAN ROBERTSON , AP Technology Writer

The revelation this past week that Apple Inc.'s popular [iPhone and iPad devices keep files of users' location data](#) raises legal and ethical questions.

The company has not commented on the controversy, but has said that the only location data the company collects is kept anonymous and not able to be tied back to specific users. Google Inc. has said the same about location data that is stored on smartphones that run its Android software. Both companies have maintained that the practice is clearly outlined in their [privacy policies](#).

Here's a look at what the issue means for you, and what you can do to protect your [location data](#), as well as the trade-offs in convenience that that entails.

Q: What is [Apple](#) collecting?

A: Technically, Apple itself is collecting very little. According to a letter that the company sent Congress last year, Apple only collects information on the location of nearby cell towers and Wi-Fi networks. It says that data is anonymized so that it isn't tied to a particular user's phone. However, [security](#) researchers have discovered that iPhones and iPads do store individuals' geographic coordinates - and have been for at least a year.

Q: What's happens to that information?

A: The information appears to stay on the devices themselves, but is also transferred to any computers that the devices are synced to. That concerns security experts because the information is transferred in an unencrypted form, which makes it a target for hackers. Those who specialize in breaking in to Apple's products say it would be very difficult to steal the file remotely because of security changes that Apple has recently made to its software. However, anyone with physical access to the phone - including devices lost or stolen - could easily see the data.

Q: What can I do to prevent this information from being collected?

A: Fortunately, it's easy to turn off the tracking capability through the settings menus. The same goes for phones built on [Google](#) Inc.'s Android operating software. Unfortunately, doing so cripples a lot of applications that make smartphones "smart" in the first place, such as maps and the Foursquare social media service. Turning off tracking means those applications won't have access to your GPS locations either, making them useless.

Q: What are lawmakers doing about such tracking?

A: For now, few rules apply. The Federal Communications Commission prohibits telephone companies from sharing customer data, including location information, with outside parties without customer consent. Yet those rules do not apply to Apple and other device makers or to the new ecosystem of mobile apps made by third-party developers. What's more, because those rules were written for old-fashioned telephone service, it's unclear whether they apply to mobile broadband service at all - even for wireless carriers like AT&T and Verizon. The FCC and the Federal Trade Commission say they are looking into the issue.

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