

Maps fiasco mars Apple's big iPhone launch

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Apple Senior VP of iPhone Software Scott Forstall demonstrates the new map application in June 2012. Apple faced growing criticism on Thursday from users around the world who complained that the tech giant's new mapping system is riddled with errors.

Melting bridges, misplaced landmarks, and major cities disappearing: Apple's glitch-ridden maps program released in its new mobile software has customers fuming and analysts puzzled.

"Although #ios6 may say differently, we can assure you that the Tacoma

Narrows Bridges have not melted," the Washington State transportation Department tweeted along with a picture of its hugely distorted spans on Apple Maps.

The new map program was released this week as part of Apple's iOS 6 mobile operating software, which powers its new iPhone 5 released Friday and can be installed as an upgrade on other Apple devices.

To the chagrin of many, the new operating system boots out Google Maps, which had been the default mapping system in Apple devices until now. And there is no Google Maps app yet for iPhone, although some reports say this is coming.

"Apple's made a new product that actually is pretty but dumb. Worse, they've used their platform dominance to privilege their own app over a competitor's offering, even though it's a worse experience for users," said Anil Dash, co-founder of the New York tech consultancy Activate.

Dash said that in trying Apple Maps, he was unable to locate the Bloomberg Tower in New York, and when he tried to find an address on Lexington Avenue in Manhattan, the program took him to Brooklyn.

"I'd tried the driving maps for everywhere from the New Jersey suburbs to rural Mexico and found out-of-date road information, impossible directions and a general level of unreliability that I never recall seeing from Google Maps, even when it first launched," Dash said on his blog.

Many of the map miscues were highlighted on social media sites, including a Tumblr page titled "Those Amazing iOS 6 Maps."

"Palace of Justice in Vienna is labeled Palace of Justice Nurnberg (which is in Germany, over 500km away)," one contributor wrote in a caption for an Apple Maps image.

"Sweden's second largest city, Gothenburg seems to have vanished," another caption read.

The maps disaster marred the image of a company which seemed to have the Midas touch for hugely successful new products like the iPhone and iPad.

"Apple is taking a painful public beating right now on its new mapping app," said Greg Sterling, a consultant with Sterling Market Intelligence, on the Search Engine Land blog, adding that it might cause some people to hold off upgrading their software or buying the new iPhone.

"It's curious that the product is so glitch-ridden. One would have assumed that the company had some indication of these problems from developers who've had the new OS for several months."

Sterling said Apple should have been able to avoid the problem "if it had positioned Maps as a beta product and solicited crowd-sourced feedback accordingly. In the absence of such messaging, everyone had inflated expectations."

The uproar prompted Finnish rival Nokia, which has a long history of mapping with its Navteq unit, to boast about its own program.

"We truly understand that maps and location-based apps must be accurate, provide the best quality and be accessible basically anywhere," Nokia's Pino Bonetti wrote on a company blog.

"That's been standard practice at Nokia for the past six years, and we also understand that 'pretty' isn't enough. You expect excellence in your smartphone mapping experience."

Some blogs advised users to work around the problems by accessing

Google Maps on the iPhone's mobile browser.

Apple meantime urged patience, saying the problems will be fixed.

"We launched this new map service knowing that it is a major initiative and we are just getting started with it," Apple spokeswoman Trudy Muller said in an email.

"We are continuously improving it, and as Maps is a cloud-based solution, the more people use it, the better it will get. We're also working with developers to integrate some of the amazing transit apps in the App Store into iOS Maps. We appreciate all of the customer feedback and are working hard to make the customer experience even better."

Although the maps application does not generate revenues directly, it often links to searches, and keep users in the company's "ecosystem," which can be important over the long term.

Zaid Al-Timimi, an independent app developer in Washington, said Apple and Google have vastly different approaches for their map programs.

"Apple's strategy for transit and for local events is to allow local app vendors to plug in to Apple Maps," he told AFP. "The Google approach of course is to provide all of the data itself so it can sell advertisements. So these are two different philosophies."

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