

Review: Apple's removal of headphone jack a net loss for consumers

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I'm not thrilled that Apple's decided to kill the headphone jack. The company's decision to exclude the venerable port from the iPhone 7 is likely to be a pain in the short term. It also has some worrying longer-term implications.

We consumers may or may not benefit sometime down the line. But it's a sure bet that Apple will both now and in the future.

Confirming rumors that had been circulating for months, Apple announced last week that the next version of the iPhone - the iPhone 7 - will be the first to ship without a [headphone jack](#). Users will have two alternative ways to listen to music. They'll be able to connect audio devices wirelessly over Bluetooth or they'll be able to plug them into the iPhone 7 Lightning port, the Apple-designed connection that owners use to charge iPhones and iPads.

The move is likely to be highly disruptive. The headphone jack is a more than 100-year-old standard that's basically universal and there are billions of devices in use that rely on it. It's simple and easy to use; you just plug things in and they work.

Because no one controls it, anyone can build devices that work with it and can price them for as little or as much as they want. Because it's used so widely, you don't have to worry about having a cable that's designed for a specific device; instead, you can use it with just about any device interchangeably. And you can connect via the headphone jack

without worrying about drawing down your battery or needing to use an external battery source.

The same can't be said for the alternatives Apple is promoting. Bluetooth can be finicky and difficult to use. The audio quality is often inferior to what you can get through a headphone jack. Bluetooth headphones are often pricey. Because they're powered by batteries, they have limited lifespans before they need to be recharged. And there are just fewer Bluetooth audio devices in use than ones that support the headphone jack.

The situation with Lightning is even worse. Apple says some 900 million Lightning-enabled devices have been sold. But the number of those that are actually headphones or audio cables are relatively few.

Meanwhile, because Apple controls Lightning, it's only available on its own devices or on ones that it authorizes. That's why you won't find any Lightning ports on Windows computers or Android phones; you won't be able to use a pair of Lightning headphones with a Samsung Galaxy S7 without some kind of adapter.

But Apple doesn't even completely support it. While every Mac in Apple's lineup includes a headphone jack, none has a Lightning port. And accessory makers, who typically have to pay Apple a license fee to use Lightning, often charge a premium for their product, likely to recoup that fee.

What's more, the move away from the headphone jack's analog connection to digital connections represented by Bluetooth and Lightning opens the door for some potentially troubling developments. Apple could - by itself or under pressure from copyright owners - use software to restrict what devices users could connect to those digital ports, what music they could stream over them or what could be done

with audio signals that are streamed through them. It had no such control over the headphone jack.

In an interview with BuzzFeed, Phil Schiller, Apple's head of worldwide marketing, said Apple had no intention of going down those paths. But the company already supports [digital rights management](#) in Apple Music and iTunes, which already places some limits on what users can do with music or movies. And the wireless AirPods headphones that Apple also announced last week support an easy-connection feature that's not available to third-party manufacturers.

This is not the first time that Apple has decided to ditch a popular standard or try to push the industry to new technology. It was among the first to drop floppy disk and DVD drives from its computers. Lightning was a replacement for the 30-pin iPod connector, another proprietary standard, but one that was used widely.

At least in this case, Apple has tacitly acknowledged the difficulty of the transition and is trying to make it easier on customers. With the iPhone 7, the company is including a pair of headphones that will plug into the Lightning port, which will likely be the first such headphones that most consumers will own. It's also including an adapter that will allow owners to connect earphones or other devices that use the headphone jack to the Lightning connector.

That's a lot better than what the company did in the past. When it moved to Lightning, it forced users who had accessories that used the iPod connector to buy a \$30 adapter separately. Still, if you want to plug your phone into your car radio's auxiliary port and charge it at the same time - a not uncommon scenario - you're still going to need to buy a separate adapter, because the one Apple is providing won't work.

Given all the trouble it's likely to cause, you may be wondering why

Apple is making this move. In his presentation at last week's event, Schiller chalked it up to courage - "the courage to move on to do something new that benefits all of us."

When Apple stood up to the FBI on the dispute over breaking into the iPhone used by the San Bernardino, Calif., attackers - a move that was very unpopular in some quarters - that took courage.

But the most valuable company in the world removing a widely used port that's open to anyone to use in favor of a proprietary port that it controls, knowing full well that the vast majority of its users will likely go along with the change? Courage is hardly the word I would use.

Still, that's not all Schiller had to say on the matter. Perhaps his most compelling argument was that by their nature, smartphones have limited internal space. By removing the headphone port, Apple can use the space it required to include a bigger battery, a higher-resolution screen, chips that enable cool new features or a more powerful processor.

In other words, with each part you include in a smartphone, there are trade-offs you have to make. He's certainly right, and in losing the headphone port, consumers may well get some compelling new features in its place.

But I worry that what we're losing is more valuable than what we'll gain.

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