

Privacy concern raised over search service on Verizon phones

March 31 2017, by Anick Jesdanun

Is Verizon planning to spy on its customers?

You might conclude that it is after reading Verizon's [privacy policy](#) on an upcoming AppFlash service, which promises easier access to search and apps on Android phones. The policy says Verizon may share data on features and services you use, along with the list of apps you have installed on your phone, with other Verizon businesses to target ads.

The privacy watchdog Electronic Frontier Foundation described AppFlash as "spyware."

Not so fast, Verizon says. In a statement to clarify its intentions, Verizon says users must explicitly grant permission before using AppFlash. Verizon says customers will be able to easily disable the service, and no one will be required to use it.

The statement, however, doesn't say exactly what permission Verizon is seeking. The privacy policy says users can control AppFlash's access to your location and contact information, but says nothing about giving control over broader usage data. At most, users can turn off ad tracking on the phone by digging through the settings.

The EFF has since retracted Thursday's blog post, pending further investigation. The group had said AppFlash represents Verizon's intention "to start monetizing its customers' private data as soon as possible." The post came just days after Congress voted to block Obama-

era restrictions on what internet-access companies like Verizon could do with information about you.

Verizon has gotten heat over user privacy before. Last year, Verizon agreed to pay a \$1.35 million fine over a "supercookie" that federal regulators said followed phone customers on the internet without their permission.

The complaints come as Verizon evolves into an advertising business, with the purchase of AOL in 2015 and the upcoming acquisition of Yahoo's internet businesses. Verizon, in knowing what web sites and apps you use, could charge companies more for ads that are targeted to your personal habits.

Android phones and iPhones already come with search services similar to AppFlash. The main difference is when people use AppFlash, Verizon gets more data on your interactions and can target ads accordingly.

AppFlash is a Verizon-branded version of Evie Launcher, which people can already get through the Android app store. After installation, one swipe from a phone edge brings up a search bar; one search pulls content from the web and installed apps at once. For instance, after searching for the movie "Beauty and the Beast," Evie offers one-tap access to buy tickets through Fandango or to read reviews through IMDB or Rotten Tomatoes.

Verizon says AppFlash will be tested initially on a single [phone](#), LG's K20 V. Verizon has offered no details on its plans beyond that, though the app is for Android only and Apple forbids carriers from shipping iPhones with their own apps already installed.

While Verizon promises to seek permission, it's not yet known how Verizon will do that and how clear it will be in explaining what's being

collected and how it will be used.

Evie Launcher does ask permission to access location and contact information, and you can say no. It also asks for permission to replace the regular home screen experience for launching individual apps. However, Evie says nothing about privacy during the setup; its privacy policy online says personal information such as usage activity and search queries will be collected, but not shared with third parties.

For those who use AppFlash, Verizon says data collected may be shared with other Verizon businesses for ad targeting. AOL, which Verizon owns, can place ads tailored web users on many other sites, too.

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