

Do iPhones and Androids eavesdrop on us? Lawmakers want to know

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Lawmakers are asking Apple CEO Tim Cook and Alphabet CEO Larry Page how our smartphones may be tracking us without our knowledge.

In separate letters to the two chief executives, Republicans on the House Energy and Commerce Committee on Monday requested more information about how iPhones and Androids are collecting data on their users.

For example, they want to know how the phones collect audio.

Can an iPhone listen to its user even when that user doesn't ask Siri for help? And "Do Apple's iPhone devices collect audio recordings of users without consent?"

As for Android devices, lawmakers ask: Can they "listen to consumers without a clear, unambiguous audio trigger?"

"Recent reports have indicated that consumer data gathered through cell phones, including location information and recordings of users, may be used

in ways that consumers do not expect," wrote committee Chairman Greg Walden, R-Ore., and others. They then asked whether those reports could apply to Apple products, and sought Google's "assistance in understanding the accuracy of these reports."

For example, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg has sworn that the social networking giant does not listen to users' phone audio for ad purposes. But the lawmakers cited a Vice article from June, in which the reporter wrote about how certain phrases he said out loud within earshot of his phone seemed to trigger Facebook ads afterward.

In addition, in Google's case, the lawmakers cited a Quartz report about Android devices collecting information from nearby cell towers even when location services are turned off and there are no SIM cards in the phones, saying "this alleged behavior is troubling."

In Apple's case, the lawmakers referred to Cook's comments amid the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica privacy scandal, in which he touted Apple as a champion for user privacy. Yet, they pointed out that Apple recently announced changes to its App Store to try to limit how much data third-party app developers collect from users. That raises "questions about how Apple device users' data is protected and when it is shared and compiled," the letter said.

They also asked Google about third-party developers' access to Android users' data.

The lawmakers asked the companies to respond no later than July 23, and for them to brief the committee's staff about the issues raised in the letters, which were also signed by Reps. Marsha Blackburn, R-Tenn., Gregg Harper, R-Miss., and Robert Latta, R-Ohio.

"Protecting our users' privacy and securing their

information is of the utmost importance," Google said in a statement Tuesday. "We look forward to answering the Committee's questions."

Apple has not returned a request for comment.

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