

Several popular apps including Yelp automatically send data to Facebook, watchdog group says

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Some Android apps including Yelp continue to send data to Facebook even if the device owner doesn't have a Facebook account, according to a privacy watchdog group.

U.K.-based non-profit Privacy International analyzed the data of 34 popular Android apps with 10 million to 500 million installs. In a December report, it found that two-thirds, or 23, apps automatically sent data to Facebook. While some apps have since been corrected, not all have, Privacy International said in an updated report.

Android versions of Yelp, job search app Indeed, language app Duolingo, the King James Bible app and Muslim prayer apps Qibla Connect and Muslim Pro continue to send data to Facebook regardless of whether users have an account on the social network or are logged out, according to the report.

Some versions of the apps for Apple iOS devices also "exhibit similar behavior," the group said.

The action is "hugely problematic" in that it not only invades users' privacy but also puts competing apps at a disadvantage, Privacy International report says. "Since so many apps still send this kind of data to Facebook, this could give the company an extraordinary insight into a large share of the app ecosystem."

The group said it had brought the issue to the attention of European Union regulators and contacted the various app makers.

Facebook said, in a statement sent to USA TODAY, "It's common for developers to share information with a wide range of platforms for advertising and analytics. We require app developers to be clear with their users about the information they are collecting and what they are doing with it, and we prohibit app developers from sending us sensitive data."

The social network, the statement continued, also takes "steps to detect and remove data that should not be shared with us. Additionally, we are planning a proactive outreach to developers beyond our existing notifications and emails to push adoption of the latest version of (its software developers kit)."

Yelp, in a statement sent to USA TODAY, said its Android app "does not also send personal data to Facebook at launch."

However, the app "may transmit a device's anonymous advertising ID to Facebook" as part of the process in how it runs ad campaigns for its apps on Facebook, Yelp said. "This use is described in Yelp's Privacy Policy and Android users can, at any time, choose to deny access to the advertising ID through Android settings."

In its statement sent to Privacy International and

shared with USA TODAY, Duolingo said it thanked the group "for their important work raising awareness of this issue. As part of our ongoing commitment to privacy, we are removing the ... component from both the Android and iOS apps in the next version releases."

In December, Privacy International said it tested many popular apps, including Spotify, and found it automatically sent data to Facebook. In a retest, PI found Spotify and two-thirds of the apps had "updated their apps so that they no longer contact Facebook when you open the app," its report said.

The update comes as Facebook said it was moving forward on its plans to combine its Messenger, Instagram and WhatsApp apps in a move to make messaging more "privacy-focused," CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced Wednesday.

Facebook has faced numerous privacy-invading incidents over the past few years, including the Cambridge Analytica scandal in which as many as 87 million had their data improperly shared. "Many people don't think Facebook can or would even want to build this kind of privacy-focused platform—because frankly we don't currently have a strong reputation for building privacy protective services," Zuckerberg wrote in the blog post.

Heightened regulator scrutiny could hamper Facebook's strategy, said Scott Devitt, an analyst with investment bank Stifel. "We believe Facebook sits in the precarious position of trying to protect the golden goose of engagement-and-data-driven advertising revenue while pivoting to a new [privacy](#)-centric business model to create the perception of addressing flaws of the past," he said. "Facebook will make this attempt while integrating the very assets that could be targets for separation by global regulators."

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