Apple

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Apple accuses Facebook of 'disregard for user privacy'

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Apple has criticised Facebook for trying to "collect as much data as possible" from users, saying it will push ahead with its planned launch of a new privacy feature despite objections from the advertising industry.

The company's director of global privacy, Jane Horvath, made the criticism in a letter to a coalition of privacy groups, reassuring them that the feature, which will require users to actively allow developers to track how they use other apps, would still be launched.

"We developed [App Tracking Transparency] for a single reason: because we share your concerns about users being tracked without their consent and the bundling and reselling of data by advertising networks and data brokers," Horvath wrote.

She defended Apple's approach to targeted adverts, which she said was based on demographic details rather than user tracking. "Facebook and others have a very different approach to targeting," Horvath wrote. "Not only do they allow the grouping of users into smaller segments, they use detailed data about online browsing activity to target ads.

"Facebook executives have made clear their intent is to collect as much data as possible across both first and third party products to develop and monetise detailed profiles of their users, and this disregard for user privacy continues to expand to include more of their products,."

The claim drew a strong rebuke from Facebook, which accused Apple if "using their dominant market position to self-preference their own data collection, while making it nearly impossible for their competitors to use the same data".

"They claim it's about privacy, but it's about profit," the company said.

The ATT feature, which is expected to be launched in early 2021, has sparked a wave of controversy since Apple announced its plans in July. When it is enabled, any app running on iPhones or iPads will need to ask users' permission before accessing particular data that can be used to track them across other apps. This data is called the "identifier for advertisers" and the advertising industry fears users will refuse permission, harming its ability to personalise adverts.

In September, Apple agreed to delay the introduction of ATT to give the industry more time to prepare. That delay prompted another outcry, from the privacy campaigners Horvath addressed in Apple's letter on Friday.

The Ranking Digital Rights campaign, a coalition including Access Now, Amnesty International and the Electronic Frontier Foundation, said: "These features will constitute a vital policy improvement, with the potential to strengthen respect for privacy across the industry. Apple should implement these features as expeditiously as possible."

Apple has faced a separate complaint based on the very existence of the ID for advertisers. In a privacy case filed on Monday, the consumer rights activist Max Schrems argued that the tracking capabilities violate privacy regulations – and would continue to do so even after Apple's planned changes were implemented.