Google-free Volla Phone: No monitoring of push notifications

Apple and Google come under fire after revelations about government surveillance by US senator

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US Senator Ron Wyden has uncovered surveillance practices in government use of push message data on iPhones and Android devices that run via Apple and Google's servers. Wyden is calling for more transparency and permission for Apple and Google to inform customers about government data access. The revelations have also caused a stir in Germany, as Democratic allies of the USA have requested metadata via push messages. The German company Volla Systeme provides a real alternative here: its Volla Phones come with the specially developed Android operating system Volla OS, which offers a Google-free environment without cloud services and emphasizes data protection and self-determination through a unique security mode.

US senator uncovers push message surveillance practices

According to recent reports, government agencies use data collected from push messages on iPhones and Android devices that run via Apple's and Google's servers to monitor users. heise online reports in the article "iPhone and Android: Push messages as a treasure trove of data for government surveillance" from December 6, 2023, for example, that US Senator Ron Wyden made these practices public for the first time and Apple confirmed this.

Until now, such requests were not allowed to be published, which has now come to light thanks to the senator's revelations. Wyden is campaigning for more transparency and is calling for Apple and Google to be allowed to inform customers about government data access and publish "aggregated statistics" on surveillance practices. Apple now plans to include these requests for push notifications in its biannual reports.

These revelations are also causing a stir in Germany, as Democratic allies of the USA have also requested metadata about push messages. Push notifications are a central function in iOS and Android that generate metadata that theoretically allows conclusions to be drawn about specific accounts. The messages are sent via the Apple and Google servers and unencrypted messages could be transmitted in plain text. The exact time period and the amount of data released by Apple and Google remain unclear.

Volla Phone: No surveillance by alternative smartphone from Germany

The notification service Firebase Cloud Messaging from Google is often used on stock Android devices (smartphones with software certified by Google). This is used by many app developers for various notifications, messages from messengers, reminders, updates or offers. Banks also use such notifications for push TAN procedures, for example.

Volla Systeme founder Dr. Jörg Wurzer: "In contrast to big techs like Google and Apple, we offer our Volla Phone users a Google-free environment based on open-source Android with our specially developed Volla OS, which does not require Google Play services and apps. In addition, devices do not require a cloud service or a mandatory account for commissioning as standard.
Apart from that, users can activate the replacement program microG if required, where Firebase Cloud Messaging is deactivated by default."

The security extends to the lowest levels of the operating system and is even supported by the chipset with a so-called TrustZone, which makes it impossible to transfer the data to another device for decryption. This is possible because the young company controls the production of the devices in Germany and the development of the software from the lowest level to the user interface, from the kernel to device drivers to the apps. To create transparency, Volla Systeme has published the source code.

The Volla security mode is unique. When activated, it can filter all data traffic not only from the browser, but also from all apps on the device and block calls from trackers, advertising and malware. In addition to this firewall, apps and their unnoticed activities in the background can also be specifically blocked. This is particularly useful if users need to use apps that are not trustworthy for work, study or in their private lives.

"Everything we do is designed for freedom through simplicity and security, and we ensure uncompromising data protection and self-determination over the

own data. Users do not have to sacrifice convenience and style. A real alternative to the big players - without sacrificing personal freedom," says Dr. Wurzer.

About the company
Volla Systeme GmbH (formerly Hallo Welt Systeme UG) was founded in 2017 by Dr. Jörg Wurzer and is an independent, German manufacturer of smartphones, either with its own Android operating system Volla OS or the mobile Linux distribution Ubuntu Touch. Volla OS is characterized by uncompromising data protection and a uniquely intelligent operating concept.

After three years of research and development, the company presented the first Volla Phone in 2020 with a crowdfunding campaign. With the Volla Phone and Volla Phone X, the Remscheid-based company has completely rethought the concept of the "smartphone". As an alternative to the version with the proprietary Volla OS, the devices are also available with the mobile Linux version Ubuntu Touch, which around 28% of Volla customers have opted for to date.

Together with other small and medium-sized companies and organizations, Volla-Phone founder Dr. Jörg Wurzer has launched an alliance for more independence, self-determination and privacy protection, which aims to promote topics such as data protection, digital self-determination, open source, privacy and independence from large technology companies. The partners include Gigaset Communications, the UBports Foundation, the VPN provider Hide.me, the search engines Startpage and Metager and the secure, encrypted e-mail service StartMail.

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