Security Newsletter

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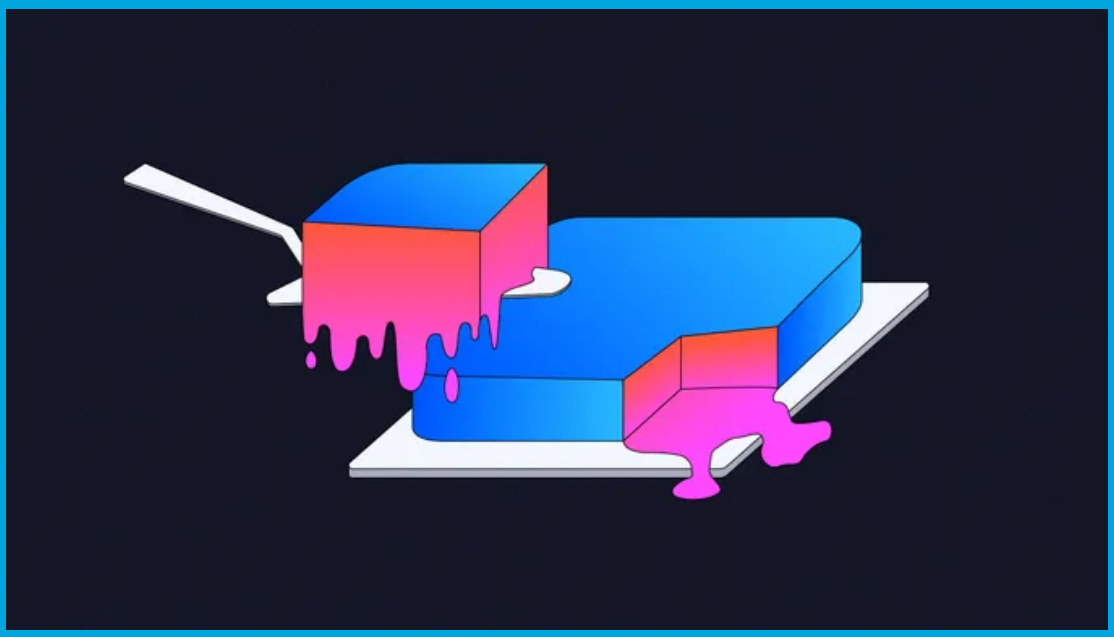
You Can't Trust App Developers' Privacy Claims on Google Play



IT'S BASICALLY IMPOSSIBLE to keep track of what all your mobile apps are doing and what data they share with whom and when. So over the past couple of years, Apple and Google have both added mechanisms to their app stores meant to act as a sort of privacy nutrition label, giving users some insight into how apps behave and what information they may share. These transparency tools, though, are populated with self-reported information from app developers themselves. And a new study focused on the Data Safety information in Google Play indicates that the details developers are providing are often inaccurate.

Researchers from the nonprofit software group Mozilla looked at the Data Safety information of Google Play's top 40 most-downloaded apps and rated these privacy disclosures as "poor," "needs improvement," or "OK." The assessments were based on the degree to which the Data Safety information did or did not align with the information in each app's privacy policy. Sixteen of the 40 apps, including Facebook and Minecraft, received the lowest grade for their Data Safety disclosures. Fifteen apps received the middle grade. These included the Meta-owned apps Instagram and WhatsApp, but also the Google-owned YouTube, Google Maps, and Gmail. Six of the apps were awarded the highest grade, including Google Play Games and Candy Crush Saga.

"When you land on Twitter's app page or TikTok's app page and click on Data Safety, the first thing you see is these companies declaring that they don't share data with third parties. That's ridiculous—you immediately know something is off," says Jen Caltrider, Mozilla's project lead. "As a privacy researcher, I could tell this information was not going to help people make informed decisions. What's more, a regular person reading it would most certainly walk away with a false sense of security."

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