

New Apple software to help tackle screen addiction

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Apple has a new solution to growing concerns about app addiction and excess screen time: more software.

The iPhone maker on Monday promised that the next version of iOS, the mobile operating system, would help its customers manage the time they and their children spend using apps and playing games. Measures include the option to place time limits on usage of specific apps.

The updates will be released to hundreds of millions of iPhone owners alongside iOS 12 later this year. The operating system update will also bring new kinds of personalised 3D emoji, augmented reality effects and group FaceTime video calls to iPhones and iPads.

Smartphone companies such as Apple and Google, which develops the Android operating system, have come under pressure from shareholders and health campaigners to deal with the constant distraction and compulsive behaviour associated with the use of mobile devices.

Tim Cook, Apple chief executive, admitted in an interview with CNN on Monday that even he uses his iPhone too much. "I thought I was fairly disciplined about this, and I was wrong," he said. "When I began to get the data, I found I was spending a lot more time than I should."

Creators of social networking apps such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as games developers, risk being collateral damage if the tools Apple is offering become widely used.

It is challenging for Silicon Valley companies to tell their customers to turn off their devices altogether, without threatening the huge profits produced by smartphones, and the apps and advertising they show.

Craig Federighi, Apple's software development chief, who introduced the changes at the company's Worldwide Developer Conference on Monday, presented the tools it said would help individuals take control. "You can make decisions about how much time you spend with your device every day," he said, with iOS 12's "comprehensive set of built-in features to help you limit distraction".

Google introduced a set of “digital wellbeing” features for Android last month at its own developer event.

Both companies will offer users a “dashboard” that tracks their screen time and gives them the ability to set limits on app usage and tame notifications.

“Apple’s focus on social responsibility closely followed that of Google and illustrates a new appreciation among the tech giants of their role in helping people manage their daily engagement with technology,” said Ben Wood, analyst at CCS Insight.

Apple’s latest steps follow a complaint from activist investors over this issue earlier this year. Jana Partners and Calpers wrote to Apple warning that it faced the threat of legal or regulatory action from parents concerned about the health of their children due to excess device usage.

On Monday, Jana welcomed Apple’s response. “This is an innovative and thoughtful response to the challenge we put forth, and we commend Apple for its leadership,” it said. “We think this is a clear win not just for shareholders given how these new tools will strengthen Apple’s ecosystem, but for parents, kids and society in the years to come.”

Parents will be able to set time limits for their children’s iPhones and iPads, applied to specific apps or entire categories such as games, chat and video. They can also enforce screen “downtime” for specific times of the day, such as overnight.

Aza Raskin, a co-founder of the non-profit Center for Humane Technology, said Apple was finally taking steps towards features that reduce the distraction and addictions its smartphones create.

“It’s worth celebrating, especially since Google and Apple are now set up to compete on who will better take care of their users’ wellbeing. Yet, there is still a long way to go in addressing the root cause of addiction and distraction, not just giving controls to manage their symptoms,” he said.

With both app limits and new privacy features built into the iPhone and Mac’s web browser, Apple seemed to be pointing to Facebook and its apps as a cause of concern. On stage at WWDC on Monday, Apple used Instagram, the Facebook-owned photo-sharing platform, when it demonstrated how to set an app time limit. Apple’s Safari browser will also block buttons used across the web for sharing to social networks, the best known of which is Facebook’s “Like”, which the iPhone maker said presented a risk to its customers’ privacy and security by “tracking users without permission”.

Facebook’s chief security officer, Alex Stamos, suggested on Twitter that Apple might not be treating all forms of online tracking fairly. “If this is about protecting privacy, and not just cute virtue signaling, then they should block all 3rd party JS [Javascript] and pixels.”

Brian Wieser, an analyst at Pivotal Research, said the social network should be able to adapt to the changes.

Apple is “capitalising” on a trend towards being more cautious about time spent on social media that is already under way, he said, but these changes are unlikely to cause a

significant challenge for Facebook. “For the small number of people who care to manage it by the minute, good for them,” he added.

Even if many more people do cut down on the time spent on Facebook, it will not necessarily hit advertising revenue because marketers might decide to pay more per ad. “If budgets available to spend stay the same then there isn’t necessarily any difference,” Mr Wieser said.

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