

TechTalk

WhatsApp Encryption ©

by John McCarthy



Hi and a warm welcome once again to TechTalk. You may remember, if you tuned in a couple of weeks ago, that we dedicated the programme to the legal problems between Apple and the FBI. We also touched upon the fact that some apps might be made more secure as a direct consequence of the struggle between these antagonists and that eventually it could prove impossible for government authorities to recover any data contained in these aforementioned smartphone applications. Unsurprisingly, in the wake of Apple's refusal to create a backdoor into the iPhone belonging to a terrorist, WhatsApp, the world's largest messaging service, has beefed up its security and rolled out end-to-end encryption for devices, including practically all smartphones: Android, Windows, Nokia, Blackberry and iPhones. Unless I'm seriously mistaken, I do believe this is the first time that technology has been used by a service that reaches over a billion people. Henceforth, if we're to believe the WhatsApp marketing men, every message, video and photo file will be completely secure. Theoretically, nobody but the sender and receiver of the message or call will be able to access the data transferred, thereby securing all communications. Hackers, cyber-criminals, Internet providers, eavesdroppers and jealous spouses and over-curious snooping government agencies will be left frothing at the mouth and unable to reach our darkest secrets.

The passage into end-to-end encryption will be seamless and will not affect how you use the app as you go about your daily routine of sending messages and files to all your friends and acquaintances. On the other hand, it does mean that it will be considerably more difficult for the company to divulge any information contained by its star app to law enforcement or government authorities as a result of the strength of encryption. As the FBI proved, breaking into a system – even reputedly the most complex and inaccessible - isn't impossible, but it will require exceptional measures ... if we're to believe all the experts. As Facebook owns WhatsApp, I think we may be entitled to a soupçon of scepticism.

In theory, what all this means is that WhatsApp is one of the most secure ways to communicate in cyberspace. Once you're updated, you should get the following message on first using the app: "Messages you send to this chat and calls are now secured with end-to-end encryption". Basically, this describes a way of transmitting data so that it can only be read by the intended recipient and not intercepted by any nefarious, ill-intentioned criminal keen on doing you irreparable wrong. Alternatively, WhatsApp might be the only way to disseminate information concerning the Panama Papers corruption scandal in China, as websites have been ordered by the government to purge and delete all reports on the subject. No doubt some of the clients of Mossack-Fonseca now wish their financial advisers had used similarly powerful data encryption. All these recent developments will undoubtedly lead to conflicts between hardware and software specialists with law enforcement agencies, even in Western democracies.

In other tech news, and again hot on the heels of the recent clash between Apple and the FBI and the former's reputedly inviolate iPhone Operating System, news came through last week of a lockscreen flaw that would allow attackers to access personal information on a locked iPhone 6S or 6S Plus using Siri, Twitter and 3D Touch. Note that all the other models are not affected. Apparently, this would allow a hacker complete access to your Contacts and Photos. Apple has already released a patch which you can download, but if you want an alternative solution then just go to Settings-Touch ID & Passcode and turn off the Siri switch.

Security and encryption will be among some of the most important topics facing society in the next few years. Governments wishing to protect citizens from terrorist attacks while simultaneously respecting rights to privacy, plus the fact that with an increasingly aging population we're becoming more vulnerable to tech-savvy criminals and hackers. Join me next week when we'll be examining the importance of passwords to keep you safe.

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