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## **Some Apps were Listening to You Through the Smartphone's Mic**

There may be a reason why that ol' "Facebook is listening to you talk" conspiracy theory refuses to die - and not just because Facebook's ad technology has gotten so good, it's downright creepy. As it turns out, some apps are actually listening. Well, kind of! According to a recent report [link] from The NYT, a number of apps using software from a company called Alphonso use the smartphone's microphone to listen for audio signals in TV ads and programs, then sometimes even connect that data with places you visit or the movies you go see.

The NYT's report found that over 250 games using Alphonso software were available in Google Play, and some were also found in Apple's App Store. Some of the apps were games and others were aimed at children. While Alphonso's software is not exactly the same situation as that ongoing Facebook meme - the one that has a number of people convinced Facebook is listening to their verbal conversations in order to target ads - it is an indication that surreptitious audio technology like this is at least possible. And that further fuels the conspiracy. There are some differences between what Alphonso is doing and what Facebook is continually accused of, however. Alphonso's software is not focused on recording your personal conversations, the company told The NYT. Instead, it's listening for audio signals emitted by the TVs in order to track viewing behavior. This data, in turn, can be sold to advertisers.

The technology here is very similar to other software the FTC warned about in 2016. It had then alerted app developers using Silverpush's software that they could be in violation of Section 5 of the FTC Act, if they said they weren't collecting or transmitting this same sort of TV data when, in fact, they do. The FTC also pointed out that the apps in question weren't telling users that they were monitoring their TV viewing habits even when the app wasn't in use.

The case with Alphonso's software sounds suspiciously similar. It serves as yet another reminder to be careful of what you install on your phone, and to carefully review an app's permissions - especially if it's asking for access to something it shouldn't require, like a game that needs to turn on your microphone, for example. You can check where you've consented to microphone use in apps for yourself. In iOS Settings, go to Privacy --> Microphone; on modern Android, go to Apps & notifications --> App Permissions, then Microphone. Alphonso's software can work in a pocket, too, The NYT said. At least the FTC historically hasn't looked too kindly on companies that try to slip this sort of behavior past consumers. Early in 2017, for instance, it fined Vizio \$2.2 million for collecting viewing history from 11 million smart TVs with proper consumer consent.