Apple suspends Siri response grading in response to privacy concerns
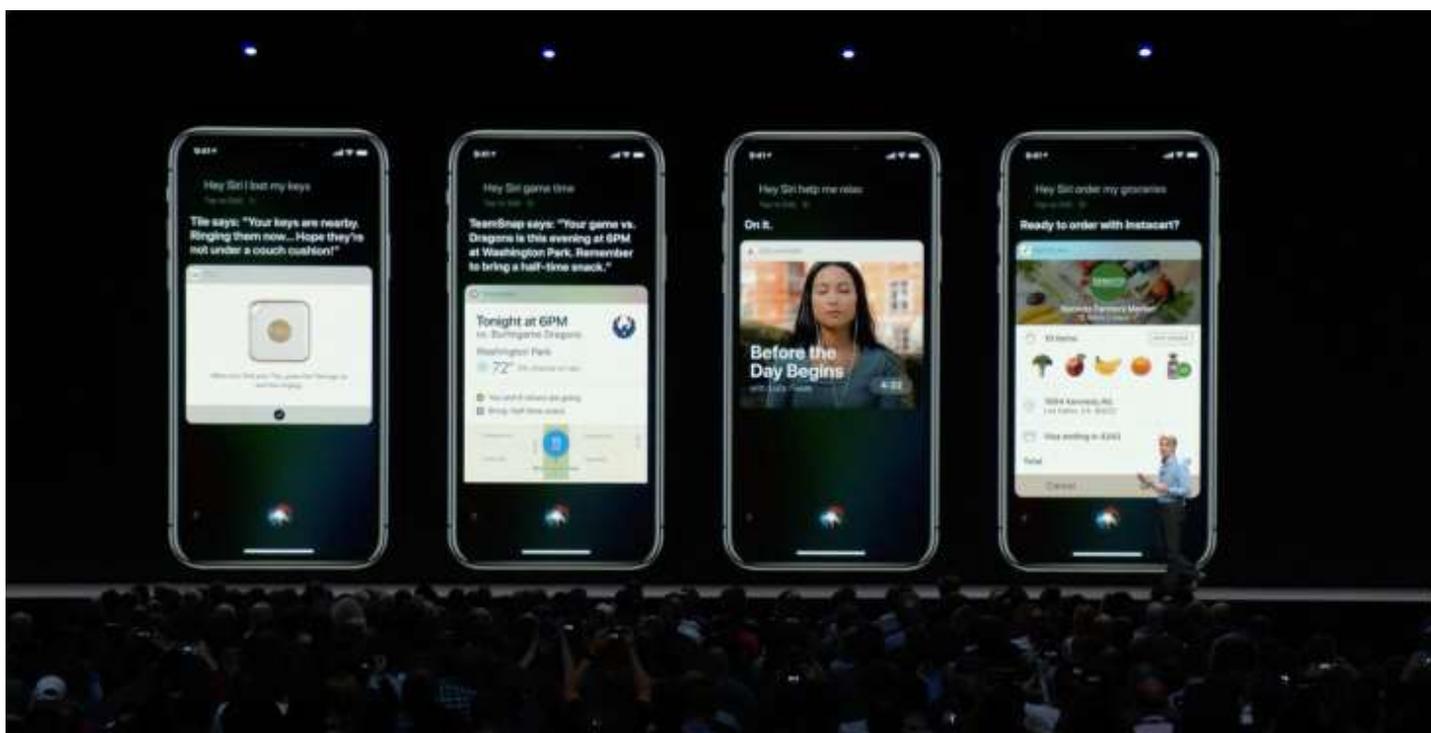
In response to concerns raised by a Guardian story last week over how recordings of Siri queries are used for quality control, Apple is suspending the program world wide. Apple says it will review the process that it uses, called grading, to determine whether Siri is hearing queries correctly, or being invoked by mistake.

In addition, it will be issuing a software update in the future that will let Siri users choose whether they participate in the grading process or not.

The Guardian story from Alex Hern quoted extensively from a contractor at a firm hired by Apple to perform part of a Siri quality control process it calls grading. This takes snippets of audio, which are not connected to names or IDs of individuals, and has contractors listen to them to judge whether Siri is accurately hearing them — and whether Siri may have been invoked by mistake.

"We are committed to delivering a great Siri experience while protecting user privacy," Apple said in a statement to TechCrunch. "While we conduct a thorough review, we are suspending Siri grading globally. Additionally, as part of a future software update, users will have the ability to choose to participate in grading."

The contractor claimed that the audio snippets could contain personal information, audio of people having sex and other details like finances that could be identifiable, regardless of the process Apple uses to anonymize the records.

They also questioned how clear it was to users that their raw audio snippets may be sent to contractors to evaluate in order to help make Siri work better. When this story broke, I dipped into Apple's terms of service myself and, though there are mentions of quality control for Siri and data being shared, I found that it did fall short of explicitly and plainly making it clear that live recordings, even short ones, are used in the process and may be transmitted and listened to.

The figures Apple has cited put the amount of queries that may be selected for grading under 1% of daily requests.

The process of taking a snippet of audio a few seconds long and sending it to either internal personnel or contractors to evaluate is, essentially, industry standard. Audio recordings of requests made to Amazon and Google assistants are also reviewed by humans.

An explicit way for users to agree to the audio being used this way is table stakes in this kind of business. I'm glad Apple says it will be adding one.

It also aligns better with the way that Apple handles other data, like app performance data that can be used by developers to identify and fix bugs in their software. Currently, when you set up your iPhone, you must give Apple permission to transmit that data.

[Apple](#) has embarked on a long campaign of positioning itself as the most privacy conscious of the major mobile firms, and therefore holds a heavier burden when it comes to standards. Doing as much as the other major companies do when it comes to things like using user data for quality control and service improvements cannot be enough if it wants to maintain the stance and the market edge that it brings along with it.