

# The Most Important Thing at CES 2019 Wasn't at CES

BY KEN C. POHLMANN

I have been going to the Consumer Electronics Show ever since Edison debuted his new, hit single “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” At every show, everyone always asks me, “So, what’s the most important thing you saw at the show?”

In years past I have cited things like Compact Disc, DVD-Video, Blu-ray, 4K TVs, and so on. This year the most important thing wasn’t a gizmo in a booth. Rather, it was a message on a billboard hung on a hotel across from the Las Vegas convention center.

More specifically, it was an Apple billboard that read, “What happens on your iPhone, stays on your iPhone.” That, of course, is a riff on the well-known Las Vegas advertising slogan. But in this case, Apple is calling out the sins of its competitors.

Apple, famously, does not attend CES. But it does occasionally use CES to tweak its competitors and this billboard adroitly did just that. Apple’s legendary “1984” commercial contrasted its maverick standing with the conformity of its competitors. Likewise, this billboard reminds us that while its rivals are profiting from a Big Brother attitude to personal privacy, Apple is attempting to respect privacy.

We have become numb to the invasions of our privacy. We don’t think twice when we Google “fishing rods” on our laptops, then see

banner ads for fishing gear pop up, or coupons for sporting goods appear on Waze as we cruise past the mall. When we drive, Android Auto is looking inside our car at parameters such as vehicle speed and engine revs and reporting the data back to Google. We post on Facebook while the company faces one scandal after another about how it sells its users’ personal data. We would rather not know if our televisions are logging and reporting what we are watching. Seventy-four million homes have smart speakers with open microphones monitored by companies like Google and Amazon. They are monetizing us, and we are okay with that.

privacy in return for technological convenience or the novelty of invention. We are 35 years past 1984, and the eyes and ears surveilling us are a hundred times worse than imagined in the novel. Maybe loss of privacy is the price for progress. Maybe I am old-fashioned for caring. But, it bothers me. And, I still have a choice.

While many companies convince us to relinquish our privacy, Apple claims that it does not profit from its customers’ personal information. Indeed, the company seems to take confidentiality very seriously. A few years ago, despite great criticism, Apple refused to help the FBI unlock the iPhone of a

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CES was awash with smart phones, smart speakers, smart TVs, and other, related kinds of products that facilitate these abuses. Like a death by a thousand cuts, we have not felt the injury as we have given away our

suspected terrorist. Whether those actions were right or wrong, it demonstrated a corporate philosophy—a commitment to customers—that goes beyond technology and marketing.

I don’t own Apple stock. I’ve never really cared for the hipster image Apple has carefully cultivated. I have never, respectfully, bought into the cult of Steve Jobs. My entire inventory of Apple products comprises an old iPod. I am not an Apple fanboy, far from it. But I am a fan of privacy. That billboard got me to thinking. No technology eco-system is perfect, but if Apple more carefully respects my privacy, maybe I should ditch Google and all the others, and switch over to Apple.

I would rather pay a few hundred dollars for my privacy than let Google and the others sell it for pennies. My privacy is worth at least that much to me.

## THE AUTHOR

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