



TECHNOLOGY

Legal experts condemn Apple bowing to White House's request to remove ICE tracking app

OCTOBER 3, 2025 · 7:34 PM ET



Bobby Allyn



View of the Steve Jobs Theater on the Apple Park campus in Cupertino.

Nic Courty/AFP via Getty Images

Apple and Google on Thursday removed apps that alert people when Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents are nearby following pressure from Attorney General Pam Bondi.

Critics of the tech giants capitulating to the Trump administration say it shows the sway President Trump has over Silicon Valley in his second term.

Apple said it yanked an app called ICEBlock from its app store after the "safety risks" of the app were made known to the company. The anonymous, crowd-sourced app describes itself as "Waze but for ICE sightings," and claims to serve as an early warning system informing people when ICE agents are nearby.

The app was launched in April and garnered hundreds of thousands of downloads, but it was only after Attorney General Pam Bondi put Apple on notice, demanding the app be pulled from the App Store, that the company made it unavailable.

"We reached out to Apple today demanding they remove the ICEBlock app from their App Store — and Apple did so," said Bondi in a statement to Fox News.

The Justice Department did not respond to NPR's questions about its request.

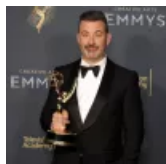
Since the app never had an Android version, it was not on Google's Play Store. Still, a company spokesperson told NPR that it, too, "removed similar apps for violations of our policies," falling in line with Apple's actions.

The developer of ICEBlock, Joshua Aaron, said he made the app in response to the Trump administration's stepped up immigration enforcement. After it was booted from Apple's app store, Aaron blamed political pressure and vowed to fight it.

He argued the app's service was engaged in a type of protected speech not unlike some of Apple's own apps, like the company's mapping app which allows users to crowdsource accidents, hazards and police speed traps along roadways.

"Capitulating to an authoritarian regime is never the right move," Aaron said in a statement.

Apple's action has reignited the debate about what's known as jawboning, when government officials censor speech through intimidation and threats.



TELEVISION

Legal experts say pulling Jimmy Kimmel from air may amount to illegal 'jawboning'

Conservatives for years accused the Biden administration of this tactic over communications it had with tech companies related to accounts that were spreading COVID and election misinformation.

Jimmy Kimmel's brief suspension by ABC following comments from Federal Communications Commission Chairman Brendan Carr was widely regarded by legal experts as illegal jawboning.



UNTANGLING DISINFORMATION

What it means for the election that the government can talk to tech companies

Kate Ruane, Director of the Center for Democracy and Technology's Free Expression Project, said Apple's move should also be viewed as the government's heavy hand muzzling free expression.

"When companies agree to the administration's demands in order to achieve some other goal, whether it be avoiding tariffs or getting merger approval, they send a message to others that it's ok to do the same," Ruane said. "What's worse, they erode the promise of the First Amendment for all of us at the same time."



BUSINESS

Trump is tightening the screws on corporate America — and CEOs are staying mum

Apple CEO Tim Cook has made strides to ingratiate himself with Trump, as the administration enacts an aggressive tariff policy that could hurt Apple's bottom line, since much of its production happens in China, India and elsewhere overseas.

Cook in August walked into the White House and gave Trump a 24-karat gold plaque, a move that has come to symbolize Silicon Valley's deference to the president.



BUSINESS

Smartphones and computers are now spared from Trump's reciprocal tariffs

Trump has given Apple and other tech companies something of a gift, too, by exempting smartphones, including Apple's iPhones, from tariffs.

"I think many large organizations are trying to keep their metaphorical heads down and act cautiously, even when the government is acting improperly or even unconstitutionally," said Gautam Hans, a law professor at Cornell University, who believes Apple would have a jawboning case but does not expect the company to pursue it. "Compliance will only incentivize further government demands."

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