Track-and-trace apps: a new world for data privacy

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Track-and-trace applications are being rolled out around the world to contain the spread of Covid-19, but how much privacy will we have to sacrifice in the fight to stay alive? **Jason Kpodo-Tay, digital campaign manager at iProspect, Ghana,** asks...

Working from home, social distancing and masking up have become the new normal globally in the fight against Covid-19. During this ongoing public health crisis, technological innovations are playing a key role in collating and disseminating data that inform the decisions of both governments and citizens.

One such innovation is contact-tracing apps, which elevate the manual, tried-and-trusted contact-tracing process into a faster and easier one. These apps show Covid-19 risk levels within a location by gathering data using either GPS or Bluetooth.

The goal and idea is simple: track if users have been near any infected persons and advise on next steps, such as self-isolation or getting tested. This BBC article further explains how it works.

Do they work?

It depends.

People have to actually download the app in the first place. In Ghana, for instance, the official contact-tracing app (which has the largest market share) has only been downloaded 5,000 times, representing less than 1% of the total smartphone population. This data varies across regions, of course, but it demonstrates that for the app to work, it needs uptake by the masses.

Then, users have to remember to update it if they test positive in order to alert other users. Failure to do so means many potential cases are falling through the cracks. Humans are creatures of habit and new habits require effort and time to learn. It's no surprise then that in Ireland – which reportedly has the highest app uptake in Europe – the app only identified about 2,000 people who may have been exposed between July and September, while there were over 7,000 confirmed

cases in that same period.

The biggest bottleneck, however, is that people have to be willing to give up their personal data in the first place.

Privacy concerns

Rising concerns over how personal data is used on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Google, TikTok and Huawei have led to new and ongoing regulations to protect users, especially in Europe and the United States of America.

On the surface, these concerns seem to be targeted at invasive advertising practices only, but when you dig a little deeper, there also appears to be apprehension about maintaining personal security and the extent of government control *and abuse* in a democracy as well as in fragile, authoritarian regimes.

Are contact-tracing apps exempt from such concerns? The answer is no, and rightfully so.

In South Korea, where contact-tracing apps were mandatory, citizens made huge privacy trade-offs – allowing the monitoring of phone logs, location history and card-transaction details – to effectively combat the virus. This worked to great effect, but the question now is, have South Koreans given their government too much personal information?

These apps are voluntary in other regions and haven't seen as much uptake, forcing health authorities to rely heavily on the traditional contact-tracing approach to combat the virus.

Device makers like Apple and Google are baking more and more privacy features into their operating systems that give some more control to users. The apps themselves parrot privacy and security features that have been implemented, such as using end-to-end encryption, anonymising user data, storing user data on the local device, and the promise to not use the data outside of the app or its intended use.

Are contact-tracing apps here to stay?

They probably are. The next pandemic might be just around the corner – there's no real way to tell, but experts believe we need to be prepared for the inevitable. But, new technologies, such as blockchain, will need to be developed to collect the necessary data without sacrificing as much user privacy.

One would argue that these apps are a grand experiment for the future of targeted marketing and government surveillance. The learnings will shape the future of how information is collected and disseminated, ushering in a new world for data privacy.

Ultimately, the fight against the spread of the virus in the absence of a vaccine lies in our collective effort to observe the necessary protocols. Contact-tracing apps can only go so far.

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