

Technology sector

Contact-tracing apps must not be used for mass surveillance, warn experts

Letter from nearly 300 academics argues against a rapid rollout that could undermine public trust



Contact-tracing apps use proximity or location-based tools to alert mobile phone users when they have come into contact with people infected with coronavirus © Valentyn Ogirenko/Reuters

Siddharth Venkataramakrishnan APRIL 20 2020

Nearly 300 leading academics have warned that some governments are building apps to trace the spread of coronavirus that do not respect privacy and will enable mass surveillance.

In an open letter, the academics praised the design of a system developed by Google and Apple to aid governments' app development, which would keep a record of whom a person had come into contact with on their phone, rather than in a central database.

They urged governments not to try to keep records of meetings centrally, saying that such a system would allow officials, hackers or private companies to spy on people, resulting in a "catastrophic" erosion of public trust.

"We are concerned that some 'solutions' to the crisis may, via mission creep, result in systems which would allow unprecedented surveillance of society at large," the letter said.

Contact-tracing apps, which use proximity or location-based tools to alert mobile phone users when they have come into contact with people infected with the virus, have proliferated globally in recent weeks as governments rush to reopen their economies after widespread lockdowns.

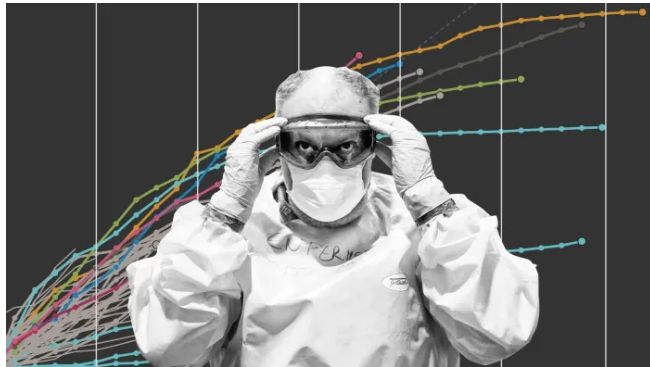
Earlier this month, Google and Apple announced that they would be collaborating to launch an "application programming interface" which governments and NGOs could make use of in building their apps.

But experts have grown increasingly concerned that a rushed rollout of such apps would fail to curb the disease.

A new [report](#) from UK research body the Ada Lovelace Institute argued that without a clear assessment of their technical limitations and potential social impacts, contact-tracing apps could have a damaging effect on society.

“The potential [for these apps] is really there,” said Carly Kind, the institute’s director, pointing to a survey commissioned by the FT, which found that contact-tracing via mobile phones was popular with [nearly two-thirds](#) of the public. “It would be hugely problematic if things were rushed in the rollout.”

Editor’s note



In order to be effective, any contact-tracing initiative must maintain the support of a large percentage of the population. According to a [report produced for NHSX](#), the innovation arm of the NHS which is leading efforts to construct a UK app, the minimum uptake required would be an estimated 80 per cent of mobile phone users — or 56 per cent of the British population.

The Financial Times is making

key coronavirus coverage free to read to help everyone stay informed. [Find the latest here.](#)

However the apps currently run the risk of excluding large swaths of the population as a result of a “digital divide” that disadvantages older and poorer people who do not have access to the latest handsets. Experts estimate that [2bn mobile phone users](#) globally will be

unable to access the system being developed by Google and Apple.

“People who are digitally excluded [such as the elderly] are least likely to be using symptom trackers but most likely to be affected,” said Ms Kind.

To ensure public trust, the institute’s report proposed the creation of an independent body to oversee the development of any new technology, as well as a multidisciplinary Group of Advisors on Technology in Emergencies.

It also recommended that the government introduce primary legislation to set out the purposes for data-processing, set timelines for the deletion of data and limit who has access to potentially sensitive information.

Letter in response to this article:

*What happens when I find out I've been in contact with a Covid-19 patient? / From
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