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Global Health Security:
COVID-19 & Its Impacts

Pandemic, Technology & Privacy: How Far Will the State Go?

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SYNOPSIS

As more countries use technology to enhance anti-COVID-19 measures, surveillance and privacy are undergoing shifts in practice and norms. These shifts may have profound effects on social governance and create new issues in a post-pandemic world.

COMMENTARY

GOVERNMENTS AROUND the globe are launching contact tracing applications in their fight against COVID-19. These contact-tracing applications come with various levels of data collection, data privacy and security practices. Some applications are mandatory while others are voluntary.

This global trend engenders concerns about privacy and the potential use of these tools after the pandemic. These concerns emerge as a factor preventing the optimal rate of adoption of applications and branch into debates if they could be better marketed, or whether they work. An Oxford study suggested that contact tracing applications need at least 60% adoption rate to help prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Contact Tracing Landscape

The landscape is diverse as countries design contact-tracing applications with different levels of technical features, and legal frameworks for privacy protection. State

policy towards privacy is a significant factor that could affect how entrenched any surveillance technology would be in a country's social governance.

In India, the Aarogya Setu contact tracing application was launched as voluntary but subsequently enforced on "central government" employees and staff of some private companies. The application's privacy policy and terms of service lack transparency on how it "tracks and stores location data". India's proposed Data Protection Bill (2019) has been criticised for "oversupply[ing] government intervention and strengthen[ing] the state."

In Europe, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) provides a degree of legal protection against any infringement of data privacy by contact tracing applications. In Singapore, the TraceTogether application is designed with transparency and privacy in mind. The source-code of the TraceTogether is made open-source, and it is available for interested parties to audit.

The global research community has begun initiatives to help improve privacy. However, the extent to which governments would go to enhance the privacy and security of their contact-tracing applications remains a question. But how would people feel if they gain nothing from sacrificing more privacy (and face more cyber-attack risks) than they agreed?

Contact Tracing Beyond Healthcare?

While discussions over privacy continue, another related issue is about expanding the reach of contact tracing applications to people who lack smartphone access. For instance, Singapore is deliberating the distribution of a wearable contact-tracing device to everyone in the country.

Singapore has also implemented SafeEntry as a mandatory national check-in/check-out system for high-risk venues such as shopping malls. As countries ease lockdown restrictions, a more extensive reach is crucial to preventing COVID-19 resurgence.

The use of multiple contact-tracing tools raises the question of how data from various platforms could be mined for predictive analysis, and inform government policies during and after the pandemic. For instance, could and should the data be used to predict potential future clusters?

Would it be in the public interest if governments expand the use of the data beyond healthcare to other aspects of social governance, or not? What would happen if the government leverages the data for forecasting in non-COVID related areas such as crime prevention and social management?

Technology & Social Discontent Scenarios

Social discontent is set to worsen as COVID-19-related restrictions cause widespread economic disruptions. In the United States, masses have poured to the streets to protest against these restrictions. The ideological leanings of some protest groups are under scrutiny.

The World Economic Forum foresees a "prolonged recession of the global economy" and social discontent over the next 18 months. Many countries are likely to see a surge in dissatisfaction over livelihood matters.

To anticipate plausible dangers, imagine a hypothetical country where citizens demand government interventions in the aftermath of this major crisis. However, the government is running out of resources and scales back on support measures that should be easing socioeconomic pressures. Some citizens resort to petty crime or undesirable activities to mitigate these pressures.

These people eschew the use of contact-tracing applications, given the perceived risk of police detection, arrest, and shame. Consequently, they become a vector of undetected community transmission in a new wave of COVID-19.

'Sousveillance': Watching the Watchers

In another scenario, some segments of the society are more severely hit by the pandemic. People in low-wage and low-skilled sectors, the gig economy, and the unemployed are in the most precarious state. Economist Guy Standing argues that a person in these circumstances "… lives in public spaces but is vulnerable to surveillance and undemocratic nudging." The angrier ones in these groups may find it harder to subjugate their privacy to state surveillance.

They embrace "sousveillance" such as filming police officers on duty. This counterculture of watching the watchers can be a form of protest. The hypothetical government sees these groups as potential sources of unrest, hence a "threat" that should be contained.

A possible reaction by some governments to "sousveillance" is to implement more means of surveillance. This possibility underpins concerns over the uncertainty around the duration of the use of contact-tracing applications. Would some governments repurpose these tools for surveillance to clamp down on potential sources of and actual unrest? While there would be agitators with malicious intent, some may participate in unrest out of social and financial desperation.

The questions posed here call for attention to issues that are more complex and go beyond debating human-security. COVID-19 affects national conditions, but more importantly, it affects the welfare of the fundamental elements of a nation – the individual.

As surveillance technology becomes increasingly entrenched in social governance, governments should also use it in an empathetic way and uphold individual rights and privacy.

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