

EEB CASE STUDY 1

COVID-19 TRACING APPS

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the global economy and society on an unprecedented scale. As the first wave of the pandemic has shown, the reduction of the number of infected people remains crucial to prevent the spread of the disease and hence, prevent a major economic crisis.

Many governments have developed, or financed the development of, software applications tracking infected individuals via mobile phones. These applications shall warn non-infected individuals ahead of time and thereby help governments to relax lockdown policies that harshly impact national economies. The so-called “tracing apps” have launched a wide debate regarding data security issues, personal freedom of movement and lockdown policies in general.

While government-owned solutions keep security concerns in public hands, private developers might be faster and more (cost) effective in their solution building. International competition in this field would further increase the quality of such a software. Questions regarding data safety and encryption remain the key concern to the end-users, combined with objections related to their freedom of movement which might be tracked and stored without their consent or knowledge.

One relevant question relates to the security of these apps. Early Covid-19 tracing apps have proven to be an easy prey for hackers. For example, in Qatar hackers obtained more than a million people’s national ID numbers and health status. In India’s app, hackers were able to determine who was sick in individual homes. In the U.S. there was a major data leak in which the smartphone app, Care19, had been sending users’ location data to the digital marketing services. There were also potential abuses identified such as finding out who visited a psychiatrist regularly, who sat near the pro-democracy activists, whose clients are certain lawyers, who are your contacts, etc. Besides this, cyber espionage is also a worry.

Now, governments face the question whether or not to develop such apps and whether or not to make their use mandatory to every citizen. The trade-off they face is between security concerns and economic concerns where the app would help to minimize the spread of the virus and protect the population and economy, including the public healthcare system.

Finally, in face of reopening borders and economies to start a “new normality” in times of COVID- 19, governments must decide what data to collect and who should have access rights.

Please tackle this dilemma:

The European Commission is planning to call for tenders to develop a pan-European tracing app. Should the use of this app be mandatory to use for all European citizens?