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Digital Tracking as a Political Program

Coronavirus and its Societal Impact - Highlights from WZB Research

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Digital Tracking as a Political Program

By Jeanette Hofmann

They are just a couple weeks old and bear names like StayHomeSafe, Home Quarantine, Electronic Fence, AC19, Shield, Alipay Healthcode or TraceTogether. They were developed in China, Iran, Singapore and South Korea, Hong Kong, Israel, and in Poland. Coronavirus tracking apps are aimed at controlling a population's health - yet they can take quite different routes. In Germany, too, a possible containment of the pandemic by way of digital tracking technologies is currently being considered.

The app TraceTogether, developed in Singapore, registers all encounters by people who spend more than 30 minutes standing less than two meters apart. It registers via Bluetooth and stores the information. If one of the persons involved tests positive, TraceTogether informs other parties and asks them to be tested as well. An app from South Korea goes even further: It creates a map from citizens' movement data. It is publically accessible, so it allows all people to see whether they have crossed paths with anyone infected with the coronavirus.

Meanwhile, the Taiwanese government has constructed an "electric fence" to ensure compliance with quarantine regulations. Anyone leaving the house or turning off their phone is reported to the police. The Polish "home quarantine app" functions in a similar vein, though it is based on facial recognition software: A quarantined person must regularly record selfies at their home. Anyone refusing the request to take a selfie within 20 minutes faces chances of being called on by police.

China has introduced "health passports" developed by Alibaba and Tencent. They use a barcode system based on a score-like assessment of potential health hazard. Utilizing body temperature, past whereabouts and encounters with others, different levels of risk appear on the smartphone as green, yellow and red color codes. Reading devices at the entrances and exits of buildings ensure that public spaces can only be accessed with a green barcode.

Such applications aren't exactly new. Movement data and networks of contact have long been useful to both counter-terrorism and conventional police work. However, coronavirus tracking apps are now blurring the institutional boundaries separating health, police and security authorities. A common justification for introducing corona apps is the situation's urgency and the tools' presumed effectiveness.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has praised China's drastic measures. Many assume there is a causal link between strict digital control and low infection rates. In Germany, too, the question of whether to use phone data by radio cell interrogation in order to identify infectious chains is being discussed openly. Data protection is often pitted against the need to fight the epidemic. But do we really have to choose between fundamental rights and health, democracy and effective politics?

The American historian Frank Snowden encourages us to view national epidemic control as a mirror of society. Measures do tend to vary considerably between political regimes.

Still, there is no empirical evidence that extensive testing, a good health infrastructure and a cooperative society willing to practice self-isolation and physical distancing aren't just as effective as state-imposed surveillance. Perhaps they work even better.

Corona apps, like the ones mentioned above, are an authoritarian regimes' instrument of choice. Such regimes either cannot or do not want to rely on their citizen's willingness to cooperate. Intact democracies have other resources at their disposal: they can expect a public to critically form opinions, insight and solidarity. Further, they can expect a considerable proportion of their population to act cooperatively. Instead of complementing these feats, digital monitoring is likely to undermine them.

Digital "tracking" of the coronavirus could be pursued by other means, voluntarily even, and without top-down regulation. A big topic in Germany right now is how apps can be used to disrupt chains of infection in a way that respects fundamental rights. Surveys indicate that people would be prepared to install a corona app, provided this measure is voluntary and, above all, respects data protection. Ideas formulated at the nationwide hackathon #WirVsVirus from March 20 to 22 provide ample evidence of the variety of possible digital solutions. On April 1, a European initiative launched a platform for a "Pan European Privacy Preserving Proximity Tracing", linking a voluntary app to an anonymous notification system. The great variety of corona tracking apps shows that even in these exceptional times, surveillance is part and parcel of a political program, not an imminent practical constraint, or a sign of technological determination.

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