



QR health codes issued to citizens through mobile apps denote their health status. BT PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

Privacy: A casualty of the virus?

By Manish Bahl

AFTER the coronavirus pandemic, the world will be quite different. Whether the lockdowns last weeks or months, very little will remain unchanged. In a bid to contain the spread of Covid-19, governments around the world have instituted health monitoring policies, leveraging GPS and other data from a variety of our personal devices.

The growing concerns surrounding privacy and surveillance seem to have taken a backseat to the virus, and many are simply looking at the ramped-up policies as smart technology being used in smart ways. The next big question is: Could these policies be the beginning of a permanent surveillance infrastructure, and how will they impact our lives in a post-Covid-19 world?

Tracking the privacy curve

Pre-Covid-19, legislations such as General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in Europe, South Africa's Protection of Personal Information Act (POPI) and Personal Data Protection Act (PDPA) in Singapore were created based on the understanding that personal data was a new source of economic wealth and individuals – not large technology companies – should have the final say in their usage.

The need to stop the virus, however, has overruled any misgivings about data privacy. Leaders in Israel, China and Singapore are forging ahead with sophisticated monitoring policies, particularly after initial exhortations to practise social distancing and self-isolation turned out to be less effective than anticipated. In Europe, where the virus has hit especially hard, even privacy-conscious governments have started gathering and analysing their citizens' location data to get a better sense of whether or not their anti-Covid-19 measures have been effective.

The most notable policy has taken hold in China, where the use of smartphone data and facial recognition cameras (already used in the country's social credit system) obliges individuals to self-report their temperature and medical condition on a daily basis. Using these measures, the government has been able to effectively track, and in some cases, isolate individuals considered to be "high risk".

Facets of these monitoring systems are already becoming permanent fixtures – QR health codes issued to citizens through mobile apps denote their health status. Without a healthy or "green" code, they can be denied entry to shopping

malls, restaurants, and even public transport.

In Singapore, the TraceTogether mobile app helps warn users when they come within two metres of infected and at-risk individuals. Within weeks of its launch, the government made the app software openly available online, and soon after, players such as Apple and Google began developing their own mobile-based contact tracing technology, in what has since been lauded as a "huge step forward" in the fight against Covid-19.

A cure with lasting implications

Proponents of health monitoring argue that extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures – that safety takes priority over everything else.

But many critics claim that a dangerous precedent is being set, and question whether the implications and fallout are indeed well understood. The fact of the matter is that surveillance is already on the rise – as early as 2007, the World Health Organisation leveraged mobile data from telecommunications networks to halt the spread of malaria in Zanzibar. In Singapore, over 80,000 additional police cameras have been installed across the island in the last decade.

Governments could argue – and rightly so – that in order to prevent a recurrence of Covid-19 or the emergence of some new pandemic, stringent data checks need to remain.

The truth, though, is that it is not just our clicks and likes that are being analysed, which serve to depict our online behaviour. When combined with our health, movement, and biometric data, all the data in effect can also describe how someone is actually reacting to the situation at hand. Put simply, it is now possible to track and analyse our very emotions.

Of course, during the Covid-19 pandemic, surveillance would seem sensible and defensible. Measures taken in these times of crisis are aimed at addressing the issue. Measures such as TraceTogether are a key part of a multi-pronged approach to containing the spread of Covid-19. In a post-virus age, however, what will we come to accept as the new norm – and will we still be able to find the balance between privacy and protection? Only time will tell.

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