

Belgian port to test virus bracelets amid tech tracing fears

April 23 2020, by Mark Carlson and Lorne Cook



In this Wednesday, April 22, 2020 photo, deckhand Gerard Bakulikira, wears a Romware COVID Radius digital bracelet, which flashes red when he is too close to someone else, as he walks on deck of a tugboat in the Port of Antwerp, Belgium. Europe's second biggest port is readying to test an electronic device aimed at helping people respect social distancing as the spread of the coronavirus eases and they return to work. From next month, two teams of workers at the Belgian port of Antwerp will be wearing chunky plastic bracelets that vibrate and

flash lights when they get too close to each other. (AP Photo/Virginia Mayo)

As the spread of the coronavirus eases and people gradually return to work pondering the impact it might have on their jobs, Europe's second-biggest port is getting ready to test a device aimed at helping thousands of people employed there to respect social distancing.

At Antwerp in Belgium, where some 900 companies operate in an area the size of a small town, two teams of port workers will be wearing next month a [bracelet](#) originally designed to find tugboat crew members that have fallen overboard but now modified to help stop the spread of the disease.

Until a vaccine is found, respecting Europe's recommended [safe distance](#) of 1.5 meters (around five feet), regular hand-washing and the use of masks remain the best methods to defend against any new virus outbreak. So, a mad scramble has begun to develop technologies to prevent its spread.

European countries are designing contact tracing apps for mobile phones to help locate outbreak sources. While they're a powerful force for good, the various devices are raising concerns about privacy and just how intrusive they might become once they're in people's homes or the workplace.

The bracelets are worn like a watch. Coated in black plastic, they vibrate when they move to within three meters (about 10 feet) of each other. The vibration strength, similar to that of a mobile telephone but more obvious when attached to a wrist, increases the closer the bracelets get and warning lights flash.



In this Wednesday, April 22, 2020 photo, deckhand Gerard Bakulikira demonstrates the use of a Romware COVID Radius digital bracelet, which flashes red to when someone is too close to him, as he pulls in the rope in on deck of a tugboat in the Port of Antwerp, Belgium. Europe's second biggest port is readying to test an electronic device aimed at helping people respect social distancing as the spread of the coronavirus eases and they return to work. From next month, two teams of workers at the Belgian port of Antwerp will be wearing chunky plastic bracelets that vibrate and flash lights when they get too close to each other. (AP Photo/Virginia Mayo)

"You have a helmet, and your safety shoes, and you have swimming vests. All these kinds of things. And now we're adding a wearable on top of that to make sure that people are safe. And if something goes wrong, that it is being detected as soon as possible," Antwerp Port Chief Technology Officer Erwin Verstaelen said.

The bracelets ensure physical distancing and collect no data. No plans have been announced at the port to use them to track workers' movements or measure their performance as some companies elsewhere have explored doing. But they can be programmed to provide information.

"Social distancing and privacy is very important," said John Baekelmans, CEO of Rombit, the company developing the bracelets. "We do not store any data. There is no communication going out of the bracelets whatsoever. It's only there to keep people safe."



In this Wednesday, April 22, 2020 photo, Ship Captain Tim Daghelet, background, approaches deckhand Gerard Bakulikira, both wearing a Romware COVID Radius digital bracelets, which flashes red when people are too close to each other, as they demonstrate how it works on the deck of a tugboat in the Port of Antwerp, Belgium. Europe's second biggest port is readying to test an electronic device aimed at helping people respect social distancing as the spread of the coronavirus eases and they return to work. From next month, two teams of workers at the Belgian port of Antwerp will be wearing chunky plastic bracelets that vibrate and flash lights when they get too close to each other. (AP Photo/Virginia Mayo)

In its guidance on the use of [mobile phone](#) apps—not bracelets or wristbands—the European Commission says they should be managed by

public health authorities and dismantled once they are no longer needed. They should be voluntary, and no one should be punished for refusing to use them.

Ideally, data would be protected by state-of-the-art encryption and only be kept a limited time.

The potential benefits of apps and other devices are easy to see. The virus has killed more than 100,000 people in Europe and Britain, according to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. But experts and [trade unions](#) worry that they could become invasive.

Isabelle Schoemann of the European Trade Union Confederation said the organization wasn't consulted about the testing. She argues that most people don't need technology to help them understand how far away they should stand from their co-workers.



In this Wednesday, April 22, 2020 photo, Rombit CEO John Baekelmans poses in front of a tugboat prior to a demonstration of the Romware COVID Radius digital bracelet in the Port of Antwerp, Belgium. Europe's second biggest port is readying to test an electronic device aimed at helping people respect social distancing as the spread of the coronavirus eases and they return to work. From next month, two teams of workers at the Belgian port of Antwerp will be wearing chunky plastic bracelets that vibrate and flash lights when they get too close to each other. (AP Photo/Virginia Mayo)



In this Wednesday, April 22, 2020 photo, Gerard Bakulikira, a deckhand on a tugboat, wears a Romware COVID Radius digital bracelet as he poses during a

demonstration in the Port of Antwerp, Belgium. Europe's second biggest port is readying to test an electronic device aimed at helping people respect social distancing as the spread of the coronavirus eases and they return to work. From next month, two teams of workers at the Belgian port of Antwerp will be wearing chunky plastic bracelets that vibrate and flash lights when they get too close to each other. (AP Photo/Virginia Mayo)



In this Wednesday, April 22, 2020 photo, ship engineer Wim Giabeler wears a Romware COVID Radius digital bracelet as he moves on deck of a tugboat in the Port of Antwerp, Belgium. Europe's second biggest port is readying to test an electronic device aimed at helping people respect social distancing as the spread of the coronavirus eases and they return to work. From next month, two teams of workers at the Belgian port of Antwerp will be wearing chunky plastic bracelets that vibrate and flash lights when they get too close to each other. (AP Photo/Virginia Mayo)



In this Wednesday, April 22, 2020 photo, ship engineer Wim Giabeler, right, and deckhand Gerard Bakulikira, left, wear Romware COVID Radius digital bracelets as they work on deck of a tugboat in the Port of Antwerp, Belgium. The Port of Antwerp and technology company Rombit are pilot testing an innovative digital bracelet aimed at preventing the spread of the coronavirus. The solution, Romware COVID Radius is an extension of the Romware ONE bracelet, which will allow employees to resume work safely as the bracelet monitors physical distance and traces contacts. (AP Photo/Virginia Mayo)



In this Wednesday, April 22, 2020 photo, Captain Tim Daghelet, right, and deckhand Gerard Bakulikira stand on the deck of a tugboat as another tug passes them in the Port of Antwerp, Belgium. Europe's second biggest port is readying to test an electronic device aimed at helping people respect social distancing as the spread of the coronavirus eases and they return to work. From next month, two teams of workers at the Belgian port of Antwerp will be wearing chunky plastic bracelets that vibrate and flash lights when they get too close to each other. (AP Photo/Virginia Mayo)



In this Wednesday, April 22, 2020 photo, an engineer and a deckhand on the deck of a tugboat in the Port of Antwerp, Belgium. Europe's second biggest port is readying to test an electronic device aimed at helping people respect social distancing as the spread of the coronavirus eases and they return to work. From next month, two teams of workers at the Belgian port of Antwerp will be wearing chunky plastic bracelets that vibrate and flash lights when they get too close to each other. (AP Photo/Virginia Mayo)



In this Wednesday, April 22, 2020 photo, an employee of Rombit holds the Romware COVID Radius bracelet prior to a demonstration of its use in the Port of Antwerp, Belgium. Europe's second biggest port is readying to test an electronic device aimed at helping people respect social distancing as the spread of the coronavirus eases and they return to work. From next month, two teams of workers at the Belgian port of Antwerp will be wearing chunky plastic bracelets that vibrate and flash lights when they get too close to each other. (AP Photo/Virginia Mayo)

"We are kind of having a test on a real-life basis, and it is a bit worrying that we are testing that on people, and that we are testing that without having been able to look into what kind of guarantees this technology would bring before the test," Schoemann told The Associated Press.

Nathalie Smuha, law and ethics researcher and assistant lecturer at the University of Leuven, expressed concern about the unequal power

relationship between employers and their staff. She called for a democratic debate on the legal, ethical and political implications of using tracing devices.

"We say that these tools should ideally be used on a voluntary basis," Smuha told AP. But, she added, "what choice do you have, if otherwise you don't have a job and you cannot provide for your family?"

Beyond that, Smuha said, people have an inherent bias toward technology that can lead us to think it makes no mistakes. This might incite us to take greater risks, or go further, than we otherwise would.

"Once you start implementing these things it's very difficult to go back," she said. "Why only use it on the work floor? Maybe you should also use it on your way to work and back, and maybe you should also use it in a shop in order to have access."

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